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TWISTING THE HEAD ON HIS SHOULDERS, GRIP-SACK SID TRIED TO MAKE OUT THE LAY OF THE GROUND BEFORE HIS MULE.

OR,
The Boss Racket at Solid City.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
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"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ORDER THAT MEANS BUSINESS.

"SHAKE not thy shaggy auricles at me, oh, ye pretty man's mule! Vent not thy incredulous he-haw in an asinine attempt to musically murmur the trade refrain of 'Aw! what're ye givin' us?' For it's Grip sack Sid that's singing this song, and his topic is THE HOUSE. The one and only greatest among the great! The glorious establishment which promotes a man for telling the truth, and hangs him out of hand if he ever stoops so low as to even dream of telling a lie!

"THE HOUSE, John Donkey, and I'm its prophet! Handles hardware or soft; wet goods or dry; useful or ornamental; inside or outside furnishing; and treat a mule just as politely as any other gentleman!"

The long-enduring animal gave its head a

vigorous shake, and Grip-sack Sid drooped in the saddle, the picture of humiliated disgust.

"Show me a hole, somebody!" he gloomily cried, with a tragic gesture. "For—how have the mighty fallen! Sidney Harper, Knight of the Grip! Once Monarch of all Drummers! And now—can't sell a single feed on credit to a hungry mule! In pity, show me a hole, somebody!"

"What do you think of this for a sample, pardner?"

A clear, crisp voice uttered the query, and at the same times its owner sprang from the bushes into the stage road, barring the way of the disgusted pilgrim.

In each hand he clasped a heavy revolver, that in his right lifted to a level with the startled eyes of Grip-sack Sid, so that he had no difficulty in gazing directly into "the hole" offered him.

Of its own accord the mule came to a halt, its master seemingly too greatly astonished by this swift response to his humiliated prayer, to even think of touching the bridle-rein.

"Just a sample of what you were calling for, dear fellow," mocked the man in the way. "If this don't suit you—show the gentleman what else we have in stock, lads!"

There was a rustling among the bushes on either side of the road, and here showed a gloved hand gripping a revolver, there protruded the muzzle of a Winchester repeater. And back of these, partly screened by the foliage, could be caught glimpses of rudely masked faces.

Grip-sack Sid glanced quickly around, noting each menacing point, while the man in front laughed maliciously before adding:

"Holes to spare, stranger! Take your choice, and if you fear any one of them isn't deep enough to hide your bigness, I'll have one or all lit up—with powder!"

"You're too—too mighty obliging, dear sir," stammered Harper, forcing a smile that was anything but mirthful, as his gaze came back to the chief. "And—now you've given me time to think—I don't reckon I want a hole nigh so bad as I let on!"

"Just lying to hear yourself talk, eh?"

"The house I have the honor to represent, sir, positively forbids its agents to lie, or even to exaggerate the—*Did you speak?*"

The change was almost laughable, brought about by an ugly motion of that pistol-armed hand.

"Hands up!" came the sharp command, as his keen eyes noted the fingers of the drummer fumbling at the fastening of his alligator-leather grip-sack.

"But—I only wanted a card to show you—"

Even as he began his meek protest, Harper raised his hands above his head, holding them thus while two burly fellows in rough clothes and faces hidden behind cloth masks, sprung from the bushes and jerked him out of the saddle.

"Fetch both mule and donkey!" curtly ordered their chief, lowering his weapon, as he saw the traveler helpless in that double grip. "It's against the law to obstruct a public highway, you understand!"

Laughing at the grim jest, the ruffians forced Harper into the bushes, while another of the gang followed with the mule. They hurried after their chief, who led them a few rods from the trail, coming to a halt on a fairly level spot under a bushy-topped tree, against the trunk of which leaned a masked and cloaked figure, seemingly awaiting their return.

With an instinctive belief that in this figure he beheld the real leader of this lawless gang, Sidney Harper quickly but accurately summed up what he saw: a compact, rather "chunky" figure, a trifle under rather than over the average height of his sex, dressed in a mixture of miner and cowboy costume, with the addition of a cloak or caped overcoat of dull gray stuff, and a full mask of gray silk, plainly stiffened so as to guard against too plainly outlining the features beneath.

"I say, governor, isn't this just a little—ur—irregular, you know?" asked Harper, with a bow to this personage. "Sort of crow eating buzzard, to speak poetically. Holding me up! Why, bless your sweet soul, pardner! I'm a traveling man myself!"

"What is your name?" demanded the lounging figure in a peculiar voice: deep, not unmusical, yet sounding as though there was some obstruction to the free action of the vocal chords.

"Sidney Harper: Grip-sack Sid, for every-day use."

"Where from, and whither bound?"

"From THE HOUSE, and next to Solid City, with the finest lot of samples bringing up the rear that ever stage carried through the mountains, sir! If you don't believe it just—Porter! You ebony essence of slowness boiled down! where's my—Holy smoke!"

Seemingly forgetting his captivity and all else in his business ardor, Grip-sack Sid turned sharply around, to stop short with a gasping ejaculation of mingled memory and indignation.

For the tall man who had halted him in the road, was kneeling by the open grip, examining its contents with an interest that defied dissimulation.

His hands clinched and his sturdy figure seemed to gather itself for a physical protest, when a light rap on one shoulder caused his eyes to turn backward, bringing one cheek against the muzzle of a cocked revolver held by the chunky figure in gray.

"Do you really reckon it worth while, Mr. Harper? You're none too handsome now: what would you look like with your roof gone?"

"Blow the fool through, if he gives you any trouble, Lizard!" harshly growled the man kneeling over the open valise.

"Yes, Captain Chameleon: with all the pleasure in life!" was the prompt response.

"But it's not a bit of trouble, my dear sir," cried Sid, evidently disposed to make the best of a bad bargain. "That's how we earn our salary, and next to booking an order we delight in showing our samples to appreciative eyes—like yours, for instance, Captain Chameleon."

The kneeling figure turned a glowing look upon the smiling, bowing speaker, uttering a muffled growl, one gloved hand checked at the mouth of the valise, its fingers closed on the handle of a hair-brush.

"Not exactly a sample, but a handy thing to have about the place, and I'll make you figures to suit all hands. Saves its cost in finger nails the first week, and in case of an emergency can be used for a currycomb or to split kindling with! anything and everything, in fact warranted solid back, purest bristles from—"

"Choke him off, lieutenant!" growled Captain Chameleon.

Harper winced a bit as that business-like revolver was shoved close to his face, but his professional smile lingered, and he seemed to regard the whole affair as something of a joke.

"Good—very good, indeed!" he grinned, twisting his head from side to side in the vain effort to keep his face out of line with that ugly muzzle. "Never run up against a practical joke that pleased me so mighty much since—Beg pardon if I brushed the bloom off your gun, lieutenant!"

There was a red mark on one temple, caused by that contact, but Harper still maintained his feeble smile, doing his level best to enjoy the grim jest.

"Thanks—muchly!" with as much of a bow as that weapon would permit. "I thought I'd learned all there was to know about drumming, but you've given me a new wrinkle this day, and I'll waft a grateful prayer your-way-ward whenever I make use of it to fetch a tough customer to time. Yes I will, pardner!"

"What're you trying to get through you, anyway?" sharply demanded his guard.

"A vote of thanks, spontaneous and unanimous, arising from my very insoles, dear fellow! To fully understand the force of which you must be informed that the first and only instructions given by OUR HOUSE is to never leave a customer without booking an order; big or little, no matter; *but book an order!* So—whenever I run up against a particularly tough customer, and find him proof against all ordinary methods of solicitation, I'll use your wrinkle. Just clap a gun against his cabeza and blandly murmur: 'Give me an order, or I'll blow your brains out!'"

Lieutenant Lizard laughed shortly, and even Captain Chameleon paused in his search to hear what their prisoner was trying to get at.

Harper beamed upon that masked face, seemingly at his ease despite the ominous surroundings.

"If you don't find what you want in there, captain, just name your preference, and I'll have it here by telegraph if the wires hold out. Cost don't cut any figure when it comes to securing a new customer, and THE HOUSE turns us loose without limit, to—"

Captain Chameleon, having emptied the valise without finding what he was looking for, sprung to his feet with an angry snarl that cut the glib-tongued traveling man short, jerking a revolver from its holster at his hip and thrusting the muzzle fairly against the face of his captive as he harshly spoke:

"You want an order, do you? All right! here you have it, and it means business from the word go! Produce that twenty thousand dollars before I can count ten, or off goes your roof!"

There was grim death glowing in the dark eyes behind that mask.

CHAPTER II.

A TOUGH CUSTOMER.

As he heard that demand, and felt that cold muzzle printing a ring directly between his eyes, Grip-sack Sid lost his professional smile, but the expression changed to one of dull amazement, rather than abject terror.

"Twenty thousand dollars! Twenty thousand angels!" he gasped, his eyes round as twin moons at their full.

"Where have you hidden the money, you thief?" sternly demanded the masked man, bearing harder upon his weapon, until Harper was forced back a pace to lessen the pain. "Will you fork over?"

"Holy smoke! if I had so much wealth would I be caught this far from home and wife, and kids?"

"One, two, three, four—"

Lieutenant Lizard, who had been placidly watching the movements of his superior until now, seemed to take alarm at the rapid counting, and with one hand bearing the pistol aside, he used the other to gently tap those covered lips, hastily muttering:

"Slow and sure fills a pocket better than quick and hasty, captain. You've scared the fellow to the verge of a fit, and he can't find the right words to utter—see?"

Sidney Harper was indeed looking like one frightened, through his blank amazement. One trembling hand was brushing his damp forehead, while the other was nervously twisting a button round and round.

"Twenty thousand dollars! *Me!* Give it up—I'm clean knocked out o' the ring," he muttered, in short gasps.

Under the pressure of that hand the outlaw chief fell back a pace or two, at the same time making a gesture which was answered by two of his rough-clad allies moving closer to Harper, ready to check any attempt at flight on his part.

Sid cast a quick glance at these guards, then his gaze went back to the two leaders. Apparently he was too thoroughly thrown off his balance to do more than stare at them, but in reality he was noting each curve, each detail, each item which went to make up the whole.

Lieutenant Lizard has been described, but the captain deserves a more particular mention.

He was about the average height of Westerners—say five feet, nine or ten inches. His figure seemed graceful as muscular, though the overcoat, cut army fashion, with long skirts and heavy cape, served as a partial disguise; but his shoulders were broad and square, his chest full, his limbs well proportioned.

On his head rested a slouch hat of gray felt, with a cowboy band of russet leather and polished buckles. Under this showed a crimson mask of silk, stiffened after the same fashion as the one worn by his second in command. This reached below his chin, and covered all of his head, hiding his hair entirely from sight.

Below the buttoned front of his overcoat could be caught a glimpse of the same rich color, then his high-topped riding-boots hid the rest.

Lieutenant Lizard seemed to be whispering earnestly to his chief, whose eyes, showing darkly through the twin apertures in the crimson mask, were intently regarding Grip-sack Sid.

What he saw, may be briefly summed up: A man of middle size and weight, apparently about thirty-five years old. His strong, rather than handsome face was smoothly shaven, bronzed to a healthy color by the warm sun. His eyes were grayish-blue, keen, frank and honest as a rule, though just now they seemed thoroughly puzzled and half-indignant.

He wore a neat business suit of rather coarse material, his trousers tucked into morocco-topped boots, the better for riding. Contrary to the rule in those regions, he wore no belt of arms, though a protuberance over one hip betrayed the presence of a revolver in his pocket.

Good use though he made of his eyes, Grip-sack Sid had hardly made any inventory of Captain Chameleon's appearance and dress, when that person rudely thrust his lieutenant aside, to spring directly in front of the drummer, speaking harshly:

"Too thin, mister! You play your part to perfection, but I cut my eye-teeth while you were in short skirts. You sung out for a hole, and I gave you your choice. You howled for an order, and I met you on that level, too. Now—*fork over!*"

"What, U O? Patented, ages ago?—wire THE HOUSE, if you really want one. Not much profit in it for us, but I never leave a customer without an order of some sort, size or description. How'll you have it? Mail, fast freight or Express? And—just give me your address, please!" and Grip-sack Sid whipped out pencil and order-book, gazing blandly into the mask as he waited.

"You're bound to make me waste a cartridge?" snarled Captain Chameleon, once more bringing his pistol into play. "I'll lift your roof in a holy second if you don't get down to level business!"

Harper shrank back, gingerly lifting an open palm as he cried:

"I say, captain! Flag o' truce!"

"I'd ought to give you one, just for luck!"

"But—if I'd rather not accept such a gift, captain?" forcing a smile, and adding in a tone that was hardly as jocular as he intended it should be: "I'm terribly ticklish about the upper-story, if you'll only believe it. I'd rather take a licking than to have my hair all mussed up—and that muzzle looks as though it might spit forth a ten-inch shell! What would I have left in the shape of a figure-head, should they come in contact? Not enough to swear by!"

"Then shell out!"

"Well, if I must!" with a long-drawn sigh, as he scratched his head with the blunt end of his pencil. "Got pen and ink handy?"

"What do you mean?"

"To give you my note for twenty thousand dollars, since you *will* have it that way. If you reckon a lead-pencil will do, why—"

The hard muzzle of that weapon cut him short, bruising his lips until a drop of blood started down his square chin. And Captain Chameleon harshly growled:

"The money, curse you! Where's the \$20,000 you are taking to Conrad Hastings?"

"Never heard of the gentleman before! Never even heard that—"

"You will have it, fool!" angrily snarled Chameleon, lifting his pistol and about to put his savage threat into execution; but, swift as thought, Lieutenant Lizard sprung forward and knocked his hand upward, the lead wasting itself on the rocks high up the mountain-side.

The Grip-sack Sharp instinctively ducked, then rising as he found his skull still intact, he turned to spring away in flight, only to leap direct into the brawny arms of one of the masked ruffians.

He struck swift and sure, dropping the fellow like a log, but before he could do more, a vicious grip was fastened on his legs from the rear, and he was cast heavily to the earth.

Two lusty knaves pounced upon him, and, before he had recovered from that heavy shock sufficiently to fight for life or liberty, Sid was helpless, with his arms bound behind his back.

Even then he was not permitted to arise, one of the ruffians squatting solidly between his shoulders, while his mate took a similar position across his legs, calmly awaiting the orders of their chief.

Once again there was a rapid interchange of guarded speech between the leaders; then Lieutenant Lizard seemed to win his point, for while the captain turned to the empty valise, aided by a knife, the younger outlaw drew near to the prisoner.

"Are his hands firmly secured, lads?"

"Tight as ef they was born that way, boss."

"We didn't dast go through him 'thout orders, boss," chimed in the other, looking up. "They's a baby-gun into his hind pocket, which *mebbe* he could hurt somebody with, ef he pushed onto the stock hard enough. Shell I—"

"Never mind. He can't well get at it with his hands tied, and I'm able to manage him at his worst, for that matter. Let him up, lads."

Sid needed no further intimation, scrambling awkwardly to his feet as soon as the two men left him at liberty. His face was bruised and dusty where it had struck against the ground in falling, but his eyes shone brightly, almost defiantly, as they met those dark orbs through the mask-holes.

"I want a word or two with you, sir," spoke the lieutenant, curtly.

"All right, sir. You saved my life from that infernal—"

"Steady, you!"

"All the same, I mean it," with a dogged nod of his head toward Captain Chameleon. "I'll even up with him if it takes a century. But *you* treated me white, and so—say on, pardner."

Instead of speaking right out, Lieutenant Lizard slipped a hand through the hampered arms of the drummer, leading him a little to one side, where a clump of bushes concealed them from view of the others. As he turned, Grip-sack Sid awkwardly stumbled up against him, one shoulder coming in sharp contact with the full chest of his captor.

"Beg pardon—foot turned on a stone," he hastily apologized, as Lieutenant Lizard drew back with an angry ejaculation.

Commercial tourist though he was, Sid Harper *could* lie when he deemed the occasion fully justified it. He lied then, for that seeming stumble had been carefully calculated, and the result went far to confirm his original suspicions.

Lieutenant Lizard accepted the apology as genuine, and gave the incident no further thought, speaking earnestly:

"You're not half the fool you try to make out, my good fellow."

"Thanks for the compliment, pardner," bowed Harper, smilingly.

"But, you're playing with fire, man! You're dallying with sudden death, as you ought to realize by what has just occurred! Haven't you ever heard of Captain Chameleon and his ways?"

"Never knew there was such a being on top of the earth, until now. But, I'll never be happy until he's broken through the crust and pulled the fragments snugly over his bosom!"

"You'll never live to see that day! You'll never live to see the ending of this day, for that matter, unless you hand over the money you were bearing to Solid City for Conrad Hastings!"

"You, too, Brutus?" sighed Harper, dolefully.

"You try to fence, but it's worse than useless. You are bearing twenty thousand dollars to Solid City, for Conrad Hastings to make the final payment on the Singed Cat Mine. Will you hand that sum over, without further parley, going foot-free and sound in limb as reward? Or shall we take it after stripping and a search? If you give us that trouble—well, old Hastings will not only lose his money, but lack a messenger!"

That the outlaw was in deadly earnest, a far duller brain than that exercised by the Grip-

sack Sharp could have divined. His face turned a shade paler, perhaps, but there was no sign of fear in face or voice as he made reply, looking squarely into that masked face:

"You're dead wrong, lieutenant, I have no such amount of money on my person, or in my care. I never heard of Conrad Hastings, or of the Singed Cat Mine, until you pronounced the names. I am simply what I claimed to be at the send-off: Sidney Harper, sometimes known as Grip-sack Sid, or the Grip-sack Sharp, from my business occupation: that of commercial traveler for a Chicago firm."

"You are willing to make oath to that effect, sir?"

"On a stack of Testaments high as yonder rocky peak—yes!"

Lizard laughed, almost musically, yet with a hidden meaning that sent a little shiver over Harper's frame.

"You're playing in mighty hard luck, then, Mr. Harper! If lying, you'll be killed for cheating us honest gentlemen into extra work. If telling the truth, you'll perish because of disappointing us so outrageously. Don't you reckon you'd better take a second thought?"

"Any other answer would be a lie, too easily exposed. I have not the money. I never had it. I never expect to have it."

"On your own head be it, then!" angrily ejaculated the lieutenant, gripping him by an arm and pushing him back toward the spot where he had been put into bonds. "Captain Chameleon!"

That call brought the outlaw chieftain toward them.

CHAPTER III.

CARRYING A JOKE TOO FAR.

"I NEVER chipped in when it wasn't my say, before, captain, and if I win forgiveness for doing so now, I'll never make another such a bad break. Here's your man; treat the fool according to his folly!"

"You couldn't make him give down?"

"Nothing but lies, and they won't pay for the wear and tear."

The twain seemed to have changed characters during those few minutes. Lieutenant Lizard was hot, angry, while Captain Chameleon had gained the upper hand of his savage temper, though there was a reddish glow in his dark eyes as he dropped a heavy hand, clad in crimson silk, on the shoulder of their captive.

Sidney Harper met that burning gaze without flinching, though he did not seem to be inviting enmity. It was simply the appearance of an honest man who knows he has truth to back up his assertions.

"You stick to the old story?" asked the captain, his tones smooth and purring as the notes of a panther. "Can't you give us a rest, and a bit of the truth by way of change?"

"If that's another term for money, I'm mighty sorry, but I can't do it, captain," reluctantly answered Sid.

"Then—go through his clothes, boys!"

With a quick movement Chameleon caught Harper by the arm and gave him a vigorous impulse which whirled him half way around and into the ready clutches of the lesser lights. Like thoroughly practiced foot-pads, they flung the prisoner flat on the ground, then searched his pockets and every square inch of his garments.

Both chief and his second in authority watched their actions with poorly hidden interest; but, however high their hopes, they were fated to disappointment.

"Ef he's got ary thing more'n what we've showed up, boss, it must lay deeper'n his pelt!" at length declared one of the searchers, dubiously scratching his head while waiting for further instructions.

None such were given. As though urged by another happy thought, Captain Chameleon turned abruptly to where the mule stood in sleepy waiting, and, aided by Lieutenant Lizard he searched saddle, blanket, bridle, covered-stirrups—every spot where valuables could possibly lie hidden, however improbable that might look on its face.

When the last faint hope had faded out, an ugly imprecation found birth behind that crimson mask, but the angry outburst was short-lived. It passed, like a summer shower, and with something like the same effect, since Captain Chameleon moved easily and spoke calmly when, at a sign, the ruffians left their chief and their prisoner standing face to face.

"I begin to believe that I've made a mistake, though I could almost have sworn you were my man. If I've treated you too roughly—"

"Never mention it, sir!" quickly interposed Sid, greatly relieved to find matters no worse. "THE HOUSE pays us for roughing it, and I have met tougher customers—but not much!"

The last words escaped in the midst of a heavy sigh, seemingly without the will of the captive, the whole forming a combination so ludicrous that Lieutenant Lizard turned abruptly aside, his chunky form shaking with silent laughter.

Chameleon bowed, a little stiffly.

"Will you swear that you have told us the

simple truth? That you are really a stranger to Solid City and to Conrad Hastings? Will you take oath that you are not carrying money to him, to make the final payment on the Singed Cat Mine?"

"I will: to each and every count."

The answer came promptly, and those gray-blue eyes unflinchingly met that keen, burning gaze. Either Sid was telling the plain truth, or he possessed unequalled powers of dissimulation.

"I'll take your word for it, my good fellow," at length nodded Chameleon, plainly seeing that he could hope for nothing better. "Some day I hope to make amends more fully, but, for the present: I beg your pardon for this last half-hour."

"I'll remember it as long as I live—your apology, of course!" bowed the Grip-sack Sharp.

"Don't try to show off, Mr. Harper," enjoined the chief, in warning. "You can count yourself mighty lucky in escaping so easily. If you doubt, just ask the first man you meet in Solid City how often Captain Chameleon lets a man slip through his fingers when they have once fairly closed upon him."

"Even if that first man should happen to be Conrad Hastings?"

The instant that name passed his lips, Grip-sack Sid felt that he had made a bad break, powerless to defend himself as he still was. And though he was far from being a coward, he shrank perceptibly from the hand that fell heavily on his shoulder.

"Look ye, Sidney Harper, if that be your name," sternly said Captain Chameleon, measuring his words with almost icy emphasis. "I've apologized to you for harsh treatment. I've said that you might go your way, as sound and as rich as you came. But—one last word of warning for your private consideration!"

"If you *have* cheated us—if you are *really* the courier we mistook you for at the start—if you *are* bearing Conrad Hastings the means of completing his purchase of the Singed Cat Mine—get your shroud ready before you call on him to hand the money over! I'll know of the transfer as soon as made, and it will mean sudden death to you!"

"Shall I say it all over again, captain? Shall I swear—"

"You have had your say, and so have I. Now—fit the gentleman for completing his journey to Solid City, lads!"

Sid was picked up bodily by the strong-armed ruffians, and carried over to where his mule stood in a doze. With a laughing signal and a lusty heave, they swung him into the saddle, but—

"I say!" spluttered Harper, kicking lustily as he realized his awkward position, "you've got the thing wrong end foremost!"

"Mistakes go, pardner!" laughed one of his captors, deftly slipping a noose around one ankle, then tossing the free end to a mate on the opposite side of the mule.

"But—Captain Chameleon!"

"Are you hungry for something to chew on, Mr. Harper?"

"No, but—this is carrying a clumsy joke entirely too far! I'll swear to even up with you all, if it takes a century!"

Sid was thoroughly angry, now, but it availed him little. The time for fighting had gone by, and with his arms bound, his feet rapidly being drawn together beneath the body of the mule, he had only his tongue left at liberty.

He used this weapon with fluency for a few seconds, until the chief sternly bade him be silent under penalty of being gagged.

"Count it mighty cheap pay for wasting our time and causing us so much trouble, you fool!" he harshly added. "Your burro'll take you direct to Solid City, never fear. And coming in this style will lend you credit when you tell about meeting Captain Chameleon."

Without pausing for an answer or retort, the outlaw stooped to bundle the scattered articles once more into the valise, snapping the plated catch, then hanging the grip over its owner's shoulder.

"Your pockets are just as we found them, Mr. Harper, and your grip as full as ever, if not quite so neatly packed. Say what you please of Captain Chameleon, just so you forget to accuse him of being a petty pickpocket!"

"When I begin to forget your—call it kindness, captain!" grinned the Gripsack peregrinator from his awkward position with his face to the tail of his shaggy mount. "When I even begin to forget, get your ascension robes ready, for the end of the world will be mighty close at hand!"

"Is that a threat, my dear peddler?" purred the outlaw.

"No; it's a fact!"

"All right! Don't be in too big a hurry to call on old Hastings, if you want to see that ascension open up. Now—give the gentleman a good send-off, lads!"

By this time the road-agents had completed their arrangements, and with coarse mirth they led the mule back to the stage-road, turning its head in the direction Gripsack Sid had been following when "held up." Then, each man gripping a stick or doubled rope, they began flogging

the mule viciously, following with blows as long as they could keep pace with the braying animal.

Captain Chameleon and his officer watched until the mule passed out of sight, then turned back to cover, the former muttering:

"What do you make of it, anyway? Was it really a water-haul, or have we let the prize slip through our fingers after all?"

"I believe the fellow is just what he laid claim to: an advance guard of the drummers," promptly answered Lieutenant Lizard. "I felt that it was a waste of time, from the start, but let you have your own way, because—"

"I'd be worse than a fool to throw away even the ghost of a chance to turn the trick!" was the impatient interjection.

"Of course you would, and we might as well fill in the time with him as to spend it in idleness while waiting for the stage. Still, I don't believe the fellow is an ally of Hastings."

"Nor I; but worse than that! I take him for one of those infernal bloodhounds! For a detective, raking up old scores!"

"What! you surely don't mean that he is—"

Lizard seemed startled. He turned upon his companion with fierce energy, but before he could say more, or Captain Chameleon could make answer, one of the lesser masks came hastily through the bushes which lined the road, touching his hat as he spoke:

"She's comin', boss! Jimmy's makin' signs that way from whar you sot him up to watch."

"Then we've no time to waste! To your posts, men! Recall your instructions, each man! Do your duty as I bade you, or I'll call you to account as soon as the racket's over!"

In less than a score of seconds the road-agents had vanished from sight, but it took Captain Chameleon longer to prepare for his share of the work.

He removed his slouch-hat and took off his overcoat, rolling them into a bundle, which he tossed to Lieutenant Lizard, standing forth in all his glory, a brilliant and a handsome figure.

On his head he wore a snugly-fitting skull-cap, bearing a single black plume, the only contrasting bit of somber color about him from crown to the tops of his riding-boots. All else was lurid crimson; silk and velveteen, the garments fitting him almost as snugly as a second skin. Even his belt, supporting knife and revolvers, was of the same ominous blood red hue.

"You know your part—play it when the right time comes!" he hastily muttered to Lizard, as the brisk rattle of wheels and clatter of hoofs announced the speedy coming of the stage-coach.

Standing just within the leafy covert, Captain Chameleon waited until the stage was only a few yards away, then cocked his pistols and sprang lightly into the road, directly in front of the startled leaders.

His right hand went up, and with only an instant for aiming, sent a bullet tearing through the bushy beard of the driver on the box, then cried out in ringing tones:

"Halt! Hands up—and empty, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN CHAMELEON GROWS UNGALLANT.

At the same instant two burly fellows darted from cover and gripped the leaders by the heads, while other twain covered the stage doors on either side with their ready Winchesters.

"Don't—don't shoot!" quavered the driver, kicking over the brake and flinging his weight on the ribbons. Good Lawd! *Ain't* I holdin' up faster'n—"

"Button up, Billy Trigger!" rung out that menacing voice. "I'm hungry for red milk, and just wait for a chance to begin lapping it! If you've got a passenger you have a grudge against, coax him to kick, will you?"

"He kin do it, fer all o' me, cap'n," with a sickly grin, as he bent his head to one side to rub his chin where the bullet had twitched so rudely at his grizzled beard.

All this passed with such rapidity that the passengers who were inside the dusty old coach, had hardly time to realize what was happening. But now there came a faint scream in a feminine voice, mingling with coarser ejaculations. And as though he caught sight of some sign of threatened trouble, one of the ruffians covering the doors cried out hoarsely:

"Shell I let blizzer, cap'n?"

"At the first motion to pull a gun—yes!" sharply responded Chameleon, advancing with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Don't shoot! They's a gal in hyar!" came a voice from the interior. "Ef you're anyways white, don't shoot!"

"I'm all red, as your eyesight ought to tell you, Harlow Crampton," laughed the outlaw chief, nearing the door of the stage.

"Good Lawd! Cap'n Chameleon!"

"No less, old buck," laughed the other, resting the muzzle of a pistol on the edge of the lowered window, glancing swiftly over the faces within. "Your servant, lady!" with a curt bow that set his sable plume to quivering.

Billy Trego—or "Billy Trigger," as he had been dubbed after the free and easy fashion of the region he lived in—had but a light load on

this trip, as that keen glance assured Captain Chameleon. But the chieftain seemed satisfied with what he found, or what he anticipated, perhaps, for his voice was almost genial as he spoke again:

"Sorry to trouble you, ma'am, and you, gentlemen; but, business is business, and just now I'm acting as its prophet. Oblige me by alighting, for a few moments, will you?"

"Age afore beauty," nodded the short, portly person who answered to the name of Harlow Crampton, forcing a laugh as he opened the door and edged through the narrow aperture. "Hope your dinner sets easy onto ye, cap'n!"

"What's biting you, old gorgy?"

"Tain't what is, so much as what *may* be, cap'n," with a repetition of that easy laugh. "I'm jest hopin' to ketch ye in a powerful good humor, fer it's mighty slim pickin' you're goin' to git out o' me, this trip—wuss luck you, cap'n!"

"You talk too much. Hold him up, lads!" gruffly growled the outlaw, giving the old fellow a shove toward his guard that almost sent him to mother earth. "Step out, the rest of you. And lively!"

Two other men emerged, meek and trembling, under the curious spell which takes possession of even the bravest of us when that grim summons breaks unexpectedly upon the ear.

This left the only occupant of the stage a young lady, whose pale countenance formed the field for strongly conflicting emotions: fear and anger predominating.

"I have little to offer, sir, beyond a watch and a few dollars," she began, only to be interrupted by Captain Chameleon:

"If you prefer being assisted, ma'am, I've a spare hand to loan you."

"But I don't—I'm afraid—"

"Not even a spice of danger, I assure you, my dear," again interposed the outlaw, leaning inside and with a deft motion claspings an arm about her slender waist, swinging her lightly to the ground before she could make an effort to resist or to foil his purpose.

She gave a slight cry, and her fair face flushed hotly as she shrunk away from his embrace; but Captain Chameleon paid no further attention to her, just then.

His men had ranged the three male passengers in a line, where they held their arms elevated under the silent persuasion of a leveled Winchester. Captain Chameleon glanced over his victims, as though making a mental calculation as to how much they would "pan out" on being "cleaned up," then turned toward Billy Trigger, who had his team under good control once more, though one road-agent still stood at their heads.

"Any mail or Express matter, Billy?"

"Not a hooter, cap'n!"

"No treasure-box, of course. You haven't any parcels consigned to any person in Solid City, Billy?"

"Ef I hev, they didn't nobody tell me so, cap'n."

"No ifs or ands, but—have you anything for Conrad Hastings?"

"I jest hain't, boss! An' I'm open fer s'arch ef you don't like ter take the word o' me fer it."

"All right; I'll talk to you later."

At the mention of that name, Conrad Hastings, the lady passenger gave a perceptible start and uttered a low ejaculation.

Chameleon was covertly watching her face, but if he saw aught therein to interest him particularly he gave no signs of that fact.

Turning once more to look over the passengers, Captain Chameleon quietly said:

"I reckon you understand what all this means, gentlemen. One of you knows me by sight, and the rest may have heard tell of me. So—make up your minds to let go as easy as I mean to take it, and we'll get along famously."

"Me fu'st, cap'n," said Crampton, with a wry grimace, as he cast an uneasy eye toward that leveled Winchester. "I'm gittin' the gout in every last finger o' me holdin' up so turrible long!"

"And you count on escaping the heat of my anger at small returns, through my hoping to fare better with the next poor devil?" chuckled Captain Chameleon, seeming in an unusually agreeable mood just then.

"Ef I'd reckoned you was out, cap'n, I'd borrowed a bigger pile while I was at it. But I never dreamt o' sech a thing, an'—"

"Just the times I'm sure to chip in, Fatty. But hold your hush, and draw in your breath so I can slip a finger into your pockets. So! I'd let you do the work, Porpoise, if I didn't know you were a natural-born fraud."

Crampton tried to laugh as though he hugely enjoyed this grim pleasantry, but made poor success of it. Captain Chameleon found only a few dollars to pay him for his time and trouble, and for a single minute Crampton shivered as with a palsy. That was while the man in red gazed intently into his face, for he knew that time had been, more than once, when Captain Chameleon had stained his soul as scarlet as he now clothed his body.

"I'll look for a bigger pile the next time you take a ride, Harlow Crampton!" he finally said, significantly, as he passed along to the second passenger.

Less time was wasted on them, the trained fingers of the robber going as by instinct to the hiding-place of money and valuables, all of which were transferred to his own person. Then, turning toward the young lady, he was met by her gloved hand, in which rested a small purse, a gold watch, and a single plain ring.

"I have nothing more worth your taking, sir," she said, calmly, her big blue eyes unflinchingly meeting his steady gaze, as he made no immediate move to accept the offering. "I pledge you my word to that effect, sir."

Captain Chameleon laughed softly as he slipped the purse from under the modest jewelry, then saying:

"Keep your ornaments, ma'm. I never rob a lady of such. Because they are too readily traced and recognized!"

"Thanks!" with a little bow, as she coolly replaced the valuables in a pocket. "Since you take only my poor, lean little purse, I'll consider this charming adventure cheaply paid for!"

Captain Chameleon laughed; low, mocking, peculiar enough it sounded from behind that silken disguise.

"Then you are more easily satisfied than I am, Miss Hastings!"

"Sir!" with a repetition of that start already noted. "I don't think I fully catch your meaning. I have given you everything—"

"One moment," he interposed, lifting a hand with an imperative gesture. "You are Miss Hastings?"

"No, sir. My name is Ida Fenwick."

"It's lucky you were born a member of the fair sex, my dear. Were you a man, I'd be under the disagreeable necessity of calling you a liar," returned Captain Chameleon, in his blandest tones.

The young lady flushed, then the color faded as swiftly, leaving her face pale as the whites of marble. But otherwise she betrayed no emotion, unless it might have been proud indignation. Certainly there was naught of fear to be discovered in her voice or carriage.

"What am I to understand by that, sir? Are you trying to insult me, simply because I am helpless?"

"Do you deny the fact of your being Conrad Hastings's daughter?" demanded Captain Chameleon, ignoring her words and sticking to his point.

"His step-daughter, sir."

"All the same in Dutch, my dear child," laughed the outlaw, his eyes glowing with grim delight at the admission. "Daughter or step-daughter, you're just as precious to the old gent, and—let us hope—just as valuable to me! No doubt your charge has given you no little anxiety up to date, so you'd ought to thank me in advance for relieving you of the responsibility."

Ida Fenwick shrunk from the red hand that twiddled its fingers before her face, casting a swift glance around her like one who seeks an opening for flight.

"None of that, my dainty!" harshly warned the outlaw, with a forward step and a firm grip on one arm. "I wouldn't weep my eyes out over your flight, alone, but I really can't permit you to carry off all that boodle!"

"Sir, I have no money! I gave you every dollar I owned!"

"Of your own, you mean, of course," mocked the villain, letting his real nature show itself at last. "But, how about the package your step-father asked you to bring him?"

"He never—he does not even suspect my coming so soon."

"Just a white one, so don't put it on record! But, that reaches the limit, Miss Fenwick," his tones growing hard and stern. "I hate the idea of treating a lady with such rudeness, but unless you act sensible and hand over the money, I'll certainly have to search your person for it!"

"You coward!" panted the indignant young woman, her eyes flashing.

"Hard words break no bones. Will you fork over, Miss Fenwick?"

"I tell you I have no more money, sir."

"Of your own. I'm not disputing that fact. But—you are carrying a package of just \$20,000 to Conrad Hastings, that being the sum which he is to pay on the Singed Cat Mine, three days or so from now. The old scoundrel fancied you could best bluff me off, but, it's no go. I want that money. Give it up quietly, or refuse and fare worse!"

His grip tightened and his other hand moved toward her throat. He had cast aside all pretense at politeness, revealing himself for what he really was, a ruffian.

But, before he could do or say more, a sharp cry of warning burst from the lips of Lieutenant Lizard, who came leaping from cover, pistols in hand:

"Ware hawks, captain! Somebody's coming down the—Ha!"

The clatter of iron-shod hoofs grew clearer and nearer, then a mounted man came dashing around the bend in the trail ahead. Lizard opened fire, and, like an echo, there came a shot from the reckless rider, before which Captain Chameleon staggered and fell heavily!

CHAPTER V.

GRIP-SACK SID'S ROUGH RIDE.

THE followers of the Crimson Chameleon may not have been more malicious than the average run of such lawless characters, but it is beyond dispute that they did their level best to make that experience a landmark in the memory of Grip-sack Sid.

They drew their knots as firmly as though they were expected to hold the greatest of criminals, and when, with a yell and a laugh, a whoop and hallo, the mule was set in motion, with his head turned toward Solid City, the knaves plied rope and branch with all the vigor of healthy muscles.

With his wrists bound behind him, and still further secured by a twist in the rope that encircled his middle, then formed a double-hitch around the high horn of the saddle, with this same lasso separating at that point, to pass one fold over each thigh, and joining again back of the cantle, where the final knot was made; with his feet almost touching each other beneath the belly of the braying mule; with all of these fastenings holding him stiffly and firmly in the saddle, there was little chance for Grip-sack Sid to dodge those laughingly vicious blows.

The mule, with ears laid back and muzzle stuck out, worked his slender legs faster and faster, racing as mule seldom raced before.

The road-agents had chased quite a little distance beyond the first turn in the trail, which was here a gentle slope upward, and watched the twain until they vanished around the next bend, laughing, as thoroughly satisfied with their sport.

Under ordinary circumstances the Grip-sack Sharp rather prided himself on his equestrian skill, and more than once during an eventful career he had displayed rare abilities as a rough rider; but, just now he felt about as uncomfortable, not to say awkward, as the veriest novice.

"Whoa, you pesky-pizen critter!" he cried, when all sight of their persecutors was lost. "If you'd legged it this way at the send-off, we'd both have fewer—Whoa, consarn ye!"

The mule gave a wild leap, a confused scramble, a few reckless plungings, then grew a little more steady in its motions, though still making all possible speed.

"Flew the track, by glory!" ejaculated Sid, with a startled glance around.

He saw that the mule, instead of keeping to the road where it made an abrupt bend to the right, had swerved to the left, plunging down a sloping bank, to enter a track of scattered rocks and bushes.

He hardly knew whether to rejoice at this departure, or to regret it. Before, he had been on the way to Solid City, where relief would be prompt enough, even if spiced with ridicule and chafing jests. Now—whither was he bound?

Twisting the head on his shoulders, Grip-sack Sid tried to make out the lay of the ground before his mule, but he saw little that was encouraging. The ground was rough and broken, wild and desolate, strongly suggestive of wolves and mountain lions.

There was only one consolation that he could find: through such rough footing, the mule must necessarily moderate its reckless pace.

"Unless some ugly cousin to the brute takes a sudden jump from cover to scare its fool's wits clean out of it again!" Sidney grumbled, giving his bonds an angry tug. "Well—even then, the critter can't throw me! Unless it sheds its shaggy pelt at the same time!"

This reflection was hardly congratulatory; just the opposite, in fact, for that one test of his bonds convinced Sid that the road-agents had not slighted their work. If he ever freed his hands, without help, it could only be after a long and wearying struggle.

After a few awkward knocks and shin-bruising stumbles, the mule came down to a walk, picking its way among the boulders, thus granting its rider a fair chance to pit his skill, strength and ingenuity against the knots of the road-agents. And, bending all his energies to this one end, Harper paid no attention to the course chosen by his mount.

Through dogged persistence and at the expense of the skin about his wrists, Sid finally contrived to get his hands out of the loop made by the lasso after crossing his thighs from horn to cantle, and though the stout thongs were still about his wrists, even that slender victory gave him cause for relief, both mental and physical.

He could move his hands up and down, and by leaning far back in the saddle he could touch the knotted lasso with his fingers.

"Steady, you fool critter!" he angrily growled, as the mule gave a particularly awkward plunge and scramble. "Break your own neck, but mine's mighty sight too valuable for—Hello!"

With a low, short-cut bray, the mule broke into a brisk trot, going so smoothly that Sid flashed a keen glance back and forth, to give vent to that sharp ejaculation.

Beyond a doubt they were once more moving along a traveled road. And, almost as certainly, that must be the stage trail out of which the frightened creature had blindly plunged—how long before?

Sid asked himself that question, among others even more startling.

Busied with his bonds, he had kept no count of time, had paid no attention to the many crooks and turns after the plain road had been abandoned. He had only the vaguest notion of how many minutes he had been thus engaged, or toward which point of the compass the mule had turned its head during that time. A stranger to the road, ignorant of its crooks and turns, only knowing from past experience that a stage must humor the mountains and gulches, conforming to the lay of the ground, he could not be certain whether he was now heading toward his original destination, or—

"Back to shake hands with that infernal Chameleon!"

The words broke involuntarily from his lips, though it was instinct rather than knowledge that gave them birth.

The sun had sunk out of sight, but the sky told him the right quarter, and he knew that he was almost facing it. They were descending a gentle slope, whereas they ought to be climbing upward. And—

"Whoa, you malicious—whoa, confound ye for—"

The mule had broken into a half-gallop, and just then one foot came down on a loose stone. The animal pitched forward on its nose, almost jerking Harper's head from his shoulders. A wild scramble to regain its balance—then the mule broke into a full run, just as though it felt those masked rascals once more thumping its haunches.

"Right into 'em, or I'm a howling liar!" gasped the luckless traveler, feeling for the revolver in his hip-pocket, twisting his head around to catch the earliest possible glimpse of what he ardently hoped might never greet his vision. "Breathe a prayer, somebody—for I haven't got time myself!"

His fears were only too well founded, for the Grip-sack Sharp was the seemingly reckless rider who came dashing around the bend, just in time to call a halt in Captain Chameleon's brutal behavior.

Shouting out the warning already recorded, Lieutenant Lizard opened fire, his first bullet stinging Sid sharply on one shoulder. And, feeling that his only chance lay in forcing a passage, Harper lifted his bound hands, gripping the revolver, firing as he came.

Of course anything like taking aim with him was out of the question, bound as he was and shooting backward; but, fortune winged his first bullet, sending Captain Chameleon reeling away from Ida Fenwick, to fall heavily to the ground.

And that same shot may have saved Grip-sack Sid's own life, since it caused Lizard to flinch, with a sharp cry of mingled rage and grief. And, instead of boring the rider through, his lead simply scored the mule deeply along one haunch.

Sid fired again, just as the mule swung its head with a bray of pain and fright, flinching from that wound. His lead bored a hole through one wildly flapping ear, and, its terror completed, the beast whirled around and fled up the trail at top speed, braying and snorting all in one breath.

All of this happened with such rapidity that Grip-sack Sid was in full flight before any of the lesser ruffians could realize what had broken loose; but as his face turned in that direction, the knight of the grip saw more than one repeating rifle swinging in his direction.

"Run, ye devil! run!" he growled, trying to use his heels, at the same time doing his level best to turn far enough around in the saddle to bring his pistol into play.

He jerked his head vigorously to one side as a bullet fairly grazed his ear, then bent as low as possible in the saddle, to lessen the size of the target for the road-agents.

A puff of dust, mingled with bits of hair, flew up into his face, and from the spasmodic leap made by the mule at the same moment, he knew that at least one bullet had hit hard.

He saw the red blood spurt out before the wound partially closed after the lead, and then the blood flowed so freely that he knew the end of his wild ride could not be far away.

An instant later the stage and the road-agents were lost to view as the mule tore around the first bend in the trail, and hoping to pass the next curve before his enemies could run to that point, Sid yelled and shouted at his mount, urging it onward as best he could.

From the quantity of blood flowing from that ugly wound, he knew that a very few minutes must bring all to an end, and though he shivered as he thought of what would follow a fall, to himself, helplessly hampered as he was, his dread of falling into the hands of the enraged outlaws was still greater.

The mule tore along at a marvelous rate of speed, the wound acting as a spur, and it covered such a distance that Grip-sack Sid began to hope that they might even reach Solid City before failing; and, thus encouraged, he slipped his pistol back into his pocket, and began wrestling with his bonds once more.

The second bend was rounded in safety, without sight or sound of the road-agents, and as he recognized the point down which his mount had

plunged before, Sid drew a long breath of relief. Only to meet with worse, less than half a mile ahead; for, with a choking bray, the death-stricken animal plunged blindly down a steep slope, to fall in a quivering heap, with a shock that left its rider white and still.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIGHT OF MIGHT.

LIEUTENANT LIZARD saw Captain Chameleon stagger back and clap one hand to his body, and heard him give a gasping curse as he fell to the ground like one receiving a death-wound.

That sight and sound almost certainly saved the life of the Grip-sack Sharp, for it caused a usually unerring aim to waver, and instead of making amends by taking another shot, the young fellow dropped his pistol and sprang to the side of the fallen chieftain with a low, choking cry.

A name came from those masked lips, but no one noticed it.

The road-agents were trying to bring down the man on the mule, to whom they owed their chieftain's fall, yelling, shouting, cursing, interfering with each other in their aimless haste.

The two passengers who have remained nameless thus far, hastily sought shelter behind the nearest rock or bush, while portly Harlow Crampton, like a true gentleman, thought more of the lady than of himself.

"Skitter—git ahind the hearse with ye!" he spluttered, almost knocking Ida Fenwick over in his haste to force her out of the way of flying lead.

Billy Trego crouched as low as possible behind the foot-board, longing to make a dash for it, yet too well trained, or too loyal, to give him full credit, to desert his passengers.

All this in a single breath, as it were.

Lieutenant Lizard was kneeling by the side of the fallen outlaw, searching for his wound with trembling fingers, but without success. He saw that the ivory-hafted knife was broken, but even then he did not recognize the truth, until Captain Chameleon partly raised his head, one hand seeking the painful spot.

Once more fortune had stood by the notorious road-agent. Instead of boring him through, as it otherwise might have done, Grip-sack Sid's first shot had squarely struck the knife-haft, splintering the ivory and deeply denting the metal inside. The shock, driving the handle violently against the side of the outlaw, had sickened him for the moment, causing him to reel and fall, but without so much as breaking the skin!

"Thank Heaven! you're not hurt, dear—" began Lieutenant Lizard, only to have a red hand sharply smite those masked lips as Captain Chameleon snarled:

"No names, you fool! What—who hit me?"

It was only the instinct taught by a life of crime and hiding that enabled him to check that dangerous speech. As his question proved, he had not yet recovered from that heavy shock, though each moment was bringing him back freer breath and clearer wits.

"That devil—Grip-sack Sid! He shot, and I saw you fall! I thought you were dead, and I felt—"

Chameleon flung the younger person aside, gaining his feet and staggering up the trail toward the bend, where he could catch a glimpse of several of his men, only one of the gang remaining at his post of duty in front of the uneasy leaders.

"Don't ye try it on, Billy Trigger!" that worthy was saying, as he kept the driver covered with one armed hand. "Mebbe ye mought ride me down, but I'd fetch you first—fetch ye, cold!"

But with the road-agents all ahead of him, and the trail too narrow to turn in, Billy Trego was not reckless enough to "buck ag'inst sech long odds," as he would have expressed the situation.

Captain Chameleon found his men staring blankly up the next straight stretch of road, over which the man on the mule had passed too swiftly for them to gain another shot.

"We bored him like a sifter, cap'n," declared one of the ruffians. "An' we kin find him when you say take a hunt, fer I see'd the burro give a mighty jump like he, too, hed ketched a lead spur!"

"All right, though you should have dropped them both in their tracks. We'll look them up later. Just now—"

Captain Chameleon had turned toward the stage, just in time to catch a glimpse of Ida Fenwick as Harlow Crampton assisted her into the coach.

"Back!" he cried, sharply, to Lieutenant Lizard, who was hastily approaching him. "Hold 'em level, there! Fooling's past, and now it's business, chuck-up!" and the chief brushed past, making direct for the stage, at the door of which Crampton was standing, his fat, usually florid face showing a yellowish pallor as he watched that impetuous approach.

"I jest reckoned the lady'd be safer inside, ye see, cap'n," he began, only to be thrust rudely back against the hind wheel by that red-gloved hand.

"Out o' the way, you hog on two legs! Chip

when it's your turn, and not before, or I'll lay you out ready for cooling!"

"I ain't a-kickin' on my own a'count, cap'n, but—"

"Trip him up, and sit on him, some of you fellows!" angrily snarled the outlaw.

This order was literally obeyed. Rude hands toppled Crampton over, and two road-agents dropped astride of his rotund figure, and one of them, at every spluttering protest, pushing the bald head downward until that rubicund nose was ignominiously rubbed in the gritty dust of the road.

Without glance or further thought in that direction, Captain Chameleon thrust his crimson head into the stage, fixing his glowing gaze on the pale face of Ida Fenwick, sternly saying:

"You've had all the grace the law allows, Miss Fenwick, and now the treatment you receive will depend entirely on your own conduct. I want that \$20,000. I know it is in your possession. I intend to have it in mine, without further delay. For the last time, I say—shell out!"

"You are worse than insolent, sir!" haughtily answered the young lady, twin spots of color leaping into her cheeks. "I have no such sum of money in my possession."

"Which goes to prove that even a lady is not above telling a flat lie! I don't think you're quite taken my caliber, as yet, Miss Fenwick. I'm mild as milk under ordinary circumstances, but just now—I want that twenty thousand dollars. I mean to have it. If you fork over, well and good: I'll let you go your way without so much as a feather ruffled. But if you stick to the text old Hastings gave you, I'll get there all the same, though you may not come off quite so well!"

"What can I say further?" faltered the maiden, shrinking into the corner of the coach, frightened despite her rare nerve by that glowing gaze. "I have already told you repeatedly—"

"So often that the phrase is worn too thin for further use. Will you hand over, or must I search your person for the money?"

As he spoke, Chameleon lifted one foot and rested it in the opening, seemingly about to enter and put his harsh threat into execution; but, before he could go further, Lizard laid a hand on his arm, and their eyes met for a brief space.

Though no words were uttered, Captain Chameleon once more yielded to the influence of his second in command, drawing back from the stage-door. Lizard whispered a few words into the captain's ear, and after a brief period, he nodded his head in assent.

Then Lizard stepped into the stage and hastily uttered a few guarded sentences, and with a gloved-hand gripping Miss Fenwick by an arm, he backed out, bringing the lady with him.

The captain took his station on the opposite side of their fair captive, all moving away from the road, toward the point where Grip-sack Sid had undergone an examination earlier in the afternoon, only pausing at the fringe of bushes to bid his men hold the stage level until his return.

Chameleon bore the others company as far as the tree, then sternly said:

"Please bear in mind, Miss Fenwick, that this is all owing to your own obstinacy. You refuse to give up the money, and—"

"I have given you every dollar I possessed, sir!"

"Except just what we want most: the \$20,000 which Conrad Hastings expects to pay on the Singed Cat Mine!"

"I swear that I have no such sum about my person, sir!"

"And I swear that you—make a mistake!" with a low, mocking bow that served to more sharply point his insolent meaning. "I'll loan you a mask to cover your blushes when that money is brought to light. And found it shall be! If you refuse to be searched by Lieutenant Lizard, then I'll perform that delicate duty myself! Take your choice." And Chameleon turned away, leaving Ida Fenwick and Lieutenant Lizard together.

Gaining the road again, he paused for an instant as he noticed the really uncomfortable position of poor Crampton, and then made a sign which his men interpreted by springing to their feet, permitting the dusty passenger to arise, with many a grunt.

"It's a mighty dirty way o' treatin' a gent—an' I ain't afeared to tell ye so, right into the teeth o' ye!" he spluttered, indignantly, shaking a puffy fist before that crimson mask.

"You brought it on yourself, Crampton, so don't grumble," was the cool retort. "Go shake yourself, and thank your stars I don't always answer a fool according to his folly! Fall back, I tell you!"

There was an echo in those tones that carried conviction with it, and though hotly indignant Harlow Crampton managed to swallow his rage for the time being.

Minute after minute passed, and Captain Chameleon cast many an impatient glance toward the covert in which he had left his lieutenant and their fair captive. Once or twice he acted as though he would go to investigate the cause of

such a prolonged absence, but as often he checked the impulse.

At length the couple returned, Miss Fenwick pale but composed, remaining with downcast eyes where the warning grip of Lizard checked her steps. And the lieutenant himself shook his head in speedy answer to that glowing look from the Crimson Chameleon.

"The money is not on her person, captain," he supplemented, in words.

"But I tell you—"

"I pledge you my word of honor, sir!" was the crisp, almost cold interruption. "If I had been a woman, like herself, I could not have searched more carefully."

Captain Chameleon stood with tightly clinched hands: so tightly that one silken glove split up the back with a crinkling sound. He seemed fairly dazed by this unexpected defeat. He acted like one who is wholly at a loss to comprehend the truth, who knows not whither to turn next. But only for a single minute, then—

"She had it—I'll swear to that!" he cried, harshly. "She must have hid the package somewhere in the hearse, and—"

Swifter even than his tongue, Lieutenant Lizard acted. He entered the stage, and ruthlessly using a knife on the cushions, never gave over until each possible hiding-place was laid bare, without revealing the object they had dared and sinned so much to obtain.

Even then Captain Chameleon was not willing to admit his utter defeat, with his own hands searching each of the male passengers, giving Crampton an especially thorough overhauling. But now, as before, he had naught but wasted time for his reward.

"Are you satisfied, after all this, sir?" coolly demanded Miss Fenwick, lifting her blue eyes to his mask. "If you had been gentleman enough to take the word of a lady for truth, you might have saved time, and we have been spared no little annoyance."

"I reckon we kin pull out, cap'n?" ventured Crampton, cautiously.

"Yes—and the devil go with ye!" savagely snarled the baffled robber. "As for you, Miss Fenwick, one word more: I know that none other can run the gantlet while I stand guard, so that if that twenty thousand dollars be paid over to the Singed Cat pards, I'll know you managed to cheat us all this day! And then—I'll call on you, sure as death itself!"

Despite her nerve, rare for a young woman not yet out of her teens, Ida Fenwick shivered with fear at those coldly savage words.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TALE OF A SINGED CAT.

MISS FENWICK rallied as quickly, and with an indignant flash in her blue eyes, she retorted:

"If I am at home when you make that call, Captain Chameleon, there will be steel and lead in the hand I offer you, not gold and silver!"

She turned, brushing his hand from her arm as she attempted to enter the stage; only attempted, for, with an ugly laugh, the outlaw caught and detained the young lady.

"But you said we might pull out, cap'n!" protested Crampton, who had taken a strong fancy for this fair pilgrim, all the more since learning what relationship she bore to Hastings, whom he was both happy and proud to call friend.

"Pile in—the quicker the better, you fellows," growled Chameleon, drawing Ida Fenwick further away from the entrance. "But, as for this sharp-tongued lady—well, reckon, I'll hold her for ransom!"

"You dare not!"

"Big words for so dainty a mouth, my dear!" "Dead—never alive!" panted Ida, with a desperate effort to free herself from that hated grasp.

Once again Lizard interfered, and for still another time his superior in rank listened to his argument with a degree of patience rare in one of his caliber.

Even Ida Fenwick herself, though so near them both, failed to catch all the words so hurriedly muttered, but she heard enough to know that the younger outlaw was arguing against the imprudence of such a step as Captain Chameleon just proposed taking.

"Raise entire town—hunt us out—too much risk when—a surer course—"

For a few moments Captain Chameleon seemed to doubt, and, fearing the worst, Crampton was actually meditating an armed resistance, and trying to decide which one of the captain's pistols he could grab and draw the easiest. Fortunately for all concerned, however, the arguments of Lizard prevailed, and Chameleon released the maiden.

With ludicrous haste, Crampton assisted Miss Fenwick into the stage, hardly waiting to enter himself before shouting to Billy Trego to whip up.

"Go easy, Billy! I'm running the hearse just at present. And you, Crampton, if you must use your jaws, chew on this for a minute or two!"

As he spoke, Chameleon thrust the muzzle of

a revolver into the fat man's face, then addressed Miss Fenwick:

"One final word, my dear young lady. I'm bound to believe you told the truth in denying being the chosen messenger of Conrad Hastings, so we'll let that point drop for now. Tell him that Captain Chameleon has it in for him, just \$20,000 worth. Tell him that unless I pick up the cash by the way, I'll call on him in person for that amount. And when I pay that visit, I'll get what I come for, or I'll leave with a fresh pair of red gloves that will never split up the back—like these!"

With a wave of his hands, the robber stepped back, and when Billy Trego looked for positive permission, gave it with a parting malediction.

Set at liberty, the rested horses sprung forward willingly at the touch of the silk, and for a few minutes no one spoke, inside or out.

They could hardly realize that they had safely passed through the ordeal. And even Crampton did not disdain to crouch a little lower between the seats than he did under ordinary circumstances.

Not until the first, then the second bend in the trail was passed by, did any one of the passengers draw a full, free breath. But then Harlow Crampton relieved his oppressed lungs, with a mighty gasp.

"Thank the Lord for all his mercies! Ef we hain't pulled clean through, then I don't want a red cent!"

"Lucky ye don't!" growled one of his companions, with a sickly grimace, visible by the rapidly fading light. "Ef they's so much as the ghost of a red cent in this 'ere hearse, then I cain't find it into any o' my pockets—no, I jest cain't!"

A groan of sympathy came from his comrade, but Crampton, who had suffered fully as much in purse and tenfold as much in person as had either of them, laughed cheerily, plainly bent on making the best of a bad bargain.

"I lost all I toted, an' nuther o' ye was stripped a mite cleaner, to say nothin' o' hev'n a dozen hefty critters makin' a bench out o' me, an' rubbin' the face o' me in the dust for a change. But I ain't even beginnin' to kick. Fer why: we're jest sloppin' over with luck that they's 'nough o' us left to come away of our own a'cord! We jest be! Fer never afore did I know of Cap'n Chameleon gittin' his mad up so terrible high, 'thout coolin' it down with—ahem!"

For a brief space Crampton had forgotten the presence of a lady, but as a gloved-hand gently touched his arm, he brought up with a confused cough, leaving that sanguinary hint incomplete.

"Lord love ye, ma'am," he hastily said, bringing a smile to his sadly begrimed countenance as he leaned closer to Miss Fenwick. "They ain't no more danger no longer. Billy's sendin' the hearse through as only Billy kin do it, an' them pesky imps ain't gwine to think o' chasin' us—no they won't, now, ma'am, honev!"

"Thanks for the assurance, Mr. Crampton, but—"

"Waal, I be—blessed!" ejaculated the old fellow, open-eyed. "Ef you don't know me, then I don't want a red cent!"

"You forget how often that ruffian pronounced your name," smiled Miss Fenwick. "And—surely I have seen your name in some of the letters my step-father, Conrad Hastings, wrote to me?"

"An' you're his da'ter? Jest to think! An' me ridin' all the way from Centropolis 'longside o' Conrad's gal, an' never so much as—"

"I trust you'll not regret having made my acquaintance even at this late stage, Mr. Crampton," Ida said, half in earnest, half in jest as those widely-opened eyes passed admiringly over her face and figure. "For I have so many questions to ask about—may I?" with an appealing droop about her red-lipped mouth and in her big blue eyes.

"Because, you see, I begin to fear that I have acted very rashly, even wrongly, in coming to visit papa without sending him word in advance, and waiting for his permission. I thought there would be no danger in making the journey: I knew each point to strike, each turn to take, and like a silly girl I counted on having such great sport in surprising father!"

"I don't reckon his britches—ahem!" with a violent cough to cover the inelegant slip, then hurriedly adding: "The hull house won't begin fer to be nigh big 'nough to hold him when he knows it, ma'am! I kin see him jumpin' up an' crackin' the two heels o' him like bones in a nigger minstrel's paws! I kin see—"

"He is well? There is nothing the matter with him, dear sir?"

"Sound as a dollar, an' hearty as a buck in—Ef I hain't got the most onbearin'est cough, I don't ax a red cent!"

Ida Fenwick gave an audible sigh of relief, though her face was still pale, and bearing signs of troubled thoughts. She realized how imprudent she had acted, and even yet she could not make up her mind that the worst was past. What could that brutal ruffian have meant?

"Has my father had any trouble, of late, Mr.

Crampton?" she abruptly asked, leaning forward to gaze keenly into that honest face by the dim light; for now the twilight was deepening there in the mountains, and night was almost upon them. "What did that—that ruffian mean by the Singed Cat Mine?"

Harlow Crampton hesitated for a brief space, seemingly in doubt just how or what to answer, and Ida quickly added:

"Be perfectly frank with me, I beg of you, dear sir. I am no coward, if I am a girl. And I wish to help father if it lies in my power. I hope—I almost believe I *can* help him, if what I suspect is true."

"Waal, ma'am, bein's it's you, an' bein's the hull town knows pritty much how things stan' atwixt Hastings an' the pards o' the Singed Cat Mine, why—mebbe I mought as well tell ye what I know."

"If you only will!"

For that touch, that glance, those softly pleading tones, Harlow Crampton would have waded through fire and water. For though what little hair remained on his caput was frosty; though his youthful grace and agility had fled forever; and though his waist had long since been lost sight of, his heart was just as young, and tender, and impressible, as in his youthful salad days.

Without again asking himself if Conrad Hastings would care to have the story told to his step-daughter, Crampton at once plunged into a relation of facts concerning the Singed Cat Mine, its present and its prospective owner.

As an old prospector and miner himself, Crampton lugged in numerous technical and local terms which were all worse than Greek to that interested auditor; but Ida Fenwick would not interrupt the flood, mentally recording the main facts, which ran something after this fashion.

Conrad Hastings had settled down in Solid City, investing considerable money in mining property, some of which promised fair if not magnificent returns when fully developed and in working condition. He was locally known as "a lucky hand," for nearly everything he touched turned out well, up to the time that he became mixed up with the mining property known as "The Singed Cat."

That was a very promising claim, located and owned by two men known as Adolph Mohr and Paul Pickett, who had opened the mine until its future wealth was almost beyond question. Hastings examined the property, satisfied himself that it would repay investment, and as the partners were too poor to hope to fully develop the mine, they were not long in striking a bargain.

The price was a large one, since none could say that the "indications" would eventually ever fill their promise, or not "peter out" all at once. Hastings paid one-third of the money down, papers were drawn up and signed, stating plainly just when and how the other two payments were to be made.

According to that contract, Hastings was entitled to put a man of his own selection into the mine, to protect and look after his interests, and he selected Evan Morris, a nephew of his, who had been serving him as clerk and secretary.

Not until shortly before the second installment was due, did any trouble arise. Then, as report had it, the Singed Cat pards turned very cranky, and after trying to get Hastings to cry off his bargain, did all they knew how to "freeze him out." Yet, as the terms of the contract were filled to the very letter, they could not refuse to accept the second payment.

Almost immediately thereafter, Evan Morris discovered the real cause of their ugly behavior: a new vein had been struck by the two pards, and the great value of the Singed Cat Mine was placed beyond all reasonable doubt. Every dollar invested in it would be repaid ten-fold, at the most modest calculation.

"An' then the racket begun in good airnest, ye want to know," explained Harlow Crampton. "An' it hain't let up till yit—wuss luck!"

"But surely father has the law on his side?" cried Ida, earnestly.

"Every smitcher of it, honey! But—waal, ef the Singed Cat pards hain't got the Ole Boy on thar's, then it looks mighty that way, it do!"

"You're mighty right, pardner!" nodded one of their fellow-passengers. "An' ef I was to make a rough guess, I'd say that Ole Boy was pure red, from top to toe! Leavin' out a black feather in his cap!"

"Stiddy, pard!" sharply ejaculated Crampton; but if his purpose was to hinder the thoughts or suspicions of Ida Fenwick from turning toward that quarter, he spent his breath in vain, though she let the occasion pass unimproved for the moment, saying instead:

"But with both law and moral right on his side, surely father will prove the victor, Mr. Crampton?"

"He shorely ought, but he jest as shorely don't seem to be gittin' thar in the right sort o' shape—an' I'm mighty sorry to say it!"

"He has not—he is well?" faltered Ida, her tones suddenly growing faint and tremulous with unspoken fears.

"He was when I left Solid City—course he's well and hearty—why wouldn't he be, an'

what's to hender? An' I'm a durn ole fool fer lettin' the crooked tongue o' me make sech a measly slip!"

"You are trying to hide something from me—what is it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHAMELEON CHANGES COLOR.

HER voice rung out sharply, and her fingers closed tightly on an arm of her neighbor as she asked that question. Harlow Crampton instinctively divined the nature of her fears, and, as the shortest method of setting them at rest, he blurted out the truth:

"It's jest the money he's lost, honey, not any harm that's come to your pap in his own body. Cross my heart ef I'm even thinkin' a lie to ye, little lady!"

Miss Fenwick drew back with a sigh of relief. If her father was safe in body, the rest might be remedied. And in calmer tones she said:

"Please tell me all the rest. As his daughter, I have a right to know what has happened."

Seeing no means of escape, Crampton complied, making a much longer story of it than was strictly necessary, though the facts were interesting enough to his breathless listener.

He told how, after the new discovery was made known to Hastings by her second cousin, Evan Morris, the Singed Cat pards grew even more surly and disagreeable, even using their rights to close the mine, hoping by such means to bother if they could not actually "freeze out" the speculator.

Hastings did his level best to bring matters to an amicable conclusion. He sent for a certified check—there was no bank, no Express Office in Solid City—for the \$20,000 still due on the mine, and offered it to the pards. They declined to take it, as the contract which Hastings himself had drawn up explicitly stated that "cash" was to be paid at such and such a time.

That night the check was stolen.

Of course Hastings at once took means to prevent its being paid, but that theft convinced him that he had an ugly fight on his hands.

He left town and procured the cash with all possible secrecy, as he thought; but on his return he was "held up" and robbed by Captain Chameleon.

He contrived to gather the amount in cash, once more, among his friends in town; but the Singed Cat pards refused to accept the money until the very hour it was due, pointing out the clause in the contract as their justification. And while Hastings was on his way home with that sum in his breast, he was assailed from ambush, robbed and left for dead!

"But he was only stunded, ye want to know, little lady," quickly added Crampton, as Ida Fenwick gave a cry of fear.

"And—was nothing done? Are all cowardly knaves who live and draw breath in Solid City?" she indignantly cried, her big eyes glowing even through the gloom that now enveloped them.

There was a brief silence, then Crampton broke it by a short, forced laugh before speaking:

"Waal, I live in Solid City, and thar's one or two more. But why do ye ax, ef I mought he so bold, ma'am?"

"If the citizens are men, why haven't they arrested that arch-villain?"

"Meanin' who, ma'm?" in the same dry tones.

"Who but the scoundrel who gives the name of Captain Chameleon?"

Crampton laughed softly, like a man who recalls a pleasing or humorous incident, but he replied briskly enough, after a moment:

"Waal, ye see, ma'am, some o' us critters *did* take jest sech a idee as that, an' we tried the best we knowed how to carry it out. We set out, all on fire an' still a-heatin', to find Captain Chameleon. Place o' that, the pesky critter *found us*! An' he come with the drop, too. An' anybody that's made a study o' his caliber, knows that the cap'n's a mighty tough customer to buck ag'inst, even when he's alone in his glory. But when we see what was ahind his redness—you know how that looks, ma'am, sence you see'd his rig-out a bit ago. An' when it come to nigh a dozen tough critters backin' of him up with guns, big an' weenty! Waal, he let us go. Turned us back. An' whether we was cowards, or whether we was heroes, *we went*! An' mighty glad to git off so easy, too!"

Despite his off-hand manner and careless speech, Crampton was cut to the quick by Ida's words, and she was quick-witted enough to realize that she had made a mistake. Where so many dangerous enemies appeared to be at work, even such a friend as this was well worth trying to keep in good humor.

"I don't blame you—any of you—for that," with a little shiver in her voice which was not all counterfeit. "I can imagine how such a surprise must work, after what happened today. But, why not arrest him when he has no army to support him? Why not take him off his guard, without his crimson disguise?"

"Ef we jest could! But how? They ain't a honest man in or nigh Solid City thet hes ever knowin'ly looked on his onkivered face. How kin we take him, when they ain't no guessin' who he mought be?"

"Who *can* he be but one of those two men—

the pards of Singed Cat Mine, as you call them?" impetuously cried Ida.

"Good Lawd!" exploded Crampton, in genuine amazement. "But I ax your grace, ma'am, fer bu'stin' out that-a-way. Of course, *you* ain't to be 'spected to know it all, like we do, in town."

"Can you swear that I am wrong?"

"Let me tell ye one thing, an' then ax it to your own self, ma'am. When your papp paid over that fu'st twenty thousand dollars, the pards 'lowed it'd be too mighty resky fer to keep sech a pile o' dingbats 'thout no better safe then thar rigimentals to stow it into. An' so Adolph Mohr tuck it to Centropolis, to 'posit it in the bank. He never got it that fur. Captain Chameleon held him up, an' milked him dry, 'long with the rest that was makin' the out-trip."

"Did he defend his property?" asked Ida, with just the suspicion of a sneer in her low tones.

"He did; fit the best he was let. Fer Cap'n Chameleon split a bullet on his skull—hit him dead center, right over the nose. A shot that even a crazy man wouldn't resk, unless he meant sure death. But Dutch hes a mighty tough nut o' his own, and I reckon mebbe the bullet hed a flaw into it, or somethin'. Anyway the lead split, a half cuttin' 'round an' comin' out back o' his two ears, one each way. And Dutch was fetched back home, fer dead. An' he lay that way fer the heft o' two days an' nights afore he opened his eyes or tuck a squar' breath. I went over thar whar he, an' Pickett, an' Adolph's gal, Pawleen, lives in a cabin nigh the Singed Cat. An' I looked cluss enough to make mighty sure they wasn't no trick about it. That shot come to kill!"

Harlow Crampton spoke deliberately, almost doggedly, like a man who expects and is prepared to refute an expression of doubt. But something in his speech gave Ida too much food for thought to leave room for vain questions, and leaning back in her corner, she let her thoughts have full swing.

Then there *was* a woman attached to the Singed Cat Mine! What did she look like? What was her height, her figure, her voice?

She longed to ask these questions, but managed to withhold them. Harlow Crampton might be all he claimed: an honest man, and the personal friend of Conrad Hastings, her step-father. Yet—with such dark, wicked, cruel work going on about her and hers, she dared not run any unnecessary risk.

Even if Crampton was true, might not one or both of his companions be in alliance with her father's enemies? True, she had seen them robbed and roughly treated by Captain Chameleon, but what did that prove? So had Adolph Mohr been robbed, and shot, and—

No, she must wait until she could consult with her father, and with Evan. A soft flush stole into her face, hidden by the gloom, as she recalled her manly cousin, whom she had not seen in person since they parted when she went to Vassar.

They could tell her all about Pauline Mohr, though she felt that, possibly, she could give them even more important information. For she knew now that a young woman was working in concert with Captain Chameleon, though in manly garb and disguised voice. Lieutenant Lizard, in his eagerness to make a thorough search for the coveted prize, had first convinced Ida, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that "he" was a woman like herself!

Crampton nor his companions made any effort to break in upon her thoughts, and shortly afterward the stage rapidly descended to the level where Solid City showed its lights, the horses speeding rapidly over the fairly smooth road, eager to reach their journey's end. For the stage line extended no further in that direction, all travel beyond being in the saddle or by "shank's express."

Billy Trego was considerably behind time, thanks to Captain Chameleon, but with so fair an excuse to offer, he felt in high spirits, rather than otherwise, chuckling grimly as he noted the gathering in front of the hotel, under the bright lights which were kept burning in defiance of the clear moonlight.

"G'lang, ye sleepy snails!" he cried, making his silk crack in swift succession, like a miniature revolver. "Yar we come, an' got the bulge now, ef we lost it back yen' a few miles!"

With cheers and laughter, the crowd scattered before that dashing finish, in true regulation style. And Billy Trego was pelted with jests and questions, fast and furious, more than one voice asking him if he had "met up with" Captain Chameleon. But Billy disdained an answer, in like off-hand fashion. He had enough material to comortably fill in the rest of the evening: ay, the entire night! And he grinned blandly as he promised himself that rare luxury: "a full night with the boys!"

Crampton quickly opened the door and assisted Ida Fenwick to alight, leading her through the crowd, up the short flight of steps which ran along the front of the hotel. But before they quite gained the broad veranda, a wild alarm broke forth.

There came the rapid clattering of a horse's hoofs on the rocky soil, and as a flying figure

came into view, dimly seen as yet by the light of the full moon, a hoarse, cracked voice panted forth:

"Ketch him! Head him off! Stop us, somebody, fer the love o'—"

At first the crowd instinctively scattered, but at that piteous appeal for help, a dozen strong-armed men barred the way, quickly choking down the trembling animal, one of the most daring jerking up its tail to extract a bunch of sharp thorns from underneath: the cruel spur which had urged the poor brute to such headlong flight.

But then, as the utterly ridiculous spectacle was fairly noted, a chorus of wild laughter burst from the gathering, mingled with hoots and cat-calls and the name of the city marshal, Jonah Rice.

A man the rider certainly was, for he sported a pair of very long mustaches, and his big feet were covered by spurred boots. But on his head was a mammoth night-cap with a wide and stiffly starched frill, tied in a huge bow-knot under his chin. And on his body was a white night-dress, also elaborately frilled and starched, while a bright plaid petticoat was tied about his middle.

At first sight he seemed to be voluntarily filling this ridiculous role, for all were too nearly convulsed with laughter to note the stout lasso that bound him fast to the saddle, until he begged for some one to cut his bonds and let him loose.

"How come ye so, Jonah?" yelled one of the crowd, and the victim of this practical joke—if jest it really was—blurted out:

"Cap'n Chameleon done it—durn an' double durn him!"

"When an' whar did he ketch ye, Rice?" sharply called out Billy Trigger, his voice filled with angry doubts and growing suspicion.

"Set me loose, somebody! Good Lawd! I'm nighly dead, I be!" groaned the poor fellow, as yet seeming hardly aware of what a preposterous figure he was cutting in night-cap, gown and petticoat.

"Whar did he hold ye up, Jonah Rice?" repeated Trego, harshly.

"Up the Black Water trail, furdur—t'was a full hour by sun, an' I've bin on the dead run ever sence!" with a hollow groan.

"An' it was Cap'n Chameleon, you say?" persisted Trego, wrapping his lines around the brake-handle. "An' of course he hed on his blood-red rig-out, too?"

"No he never didn't, durn ye! He was dressed in clean blue all over—clean blue, head-kiver-in' an' all!"

"It's a darn lie!" cried Billy, leaping to the ground.

CHAPTER IX.

A COMPANION IN MISFORTUNE.

TWILIGHT had faded into night before Grip-sack Sid recovered his senses, lost when his rough ride terminated so abruptly. And his first waking thought was that his landlord had given him an unusually comfortable, chilly, hard, uneven bed for the night!

Just long enough for that fancy to form itself, so familiar to all Western knights of the grip, then his eyes and memory both began to serve him in loyal fashion.

He instinctively tried to reach a weapon, casting a glance about him, as far as could be done by one in his present situation. He had not yet recognized the lapse of time, and naturally anticipated a rush upon him by Captain Chameleon and his ruffians.

That effort sent a growing thrill of pain over his person, from head to body, down through his limbs—no! through one leg only. His other—what had become of it?

For a single breath Grip-sack Sid wondered if the road-agents had actually shot it off, while the mule was bearing him away in flight!

Preposterous as that fancy sounds, it seemed so real and reasonable, just then, that Harper gave a violent start and uttered a sharp cry of mingled pain and grief.

That start swiftly dispelled the error, for it set the blood to circulating a little more freely, and as that terribly delightful prickling sensation crept from hip to ankle through the "missing" leg, Grip-sack Sid fairly howled. No other word will fully serve the purpose, though he strove his level best to smother the sound, knowing, now that his wits were waking up, how surely the road-agents would butcher him to avenge the fall of their chieftain.

Wondering that they had not come upon him before this, and gradually gaining hope as he more nearly realized the lapse of time, Sidney Harper lay motionless and in silence for several minutes. Long enough to make sure that if the road-agents were really searching for him, none of their number were in his immediate vicinity.

With this point settled to his satisfaction, Grip-sack Sid turned his attention to his own hurts and his chances of escape from a decidedly ugly predicament. For by this time he knew that the mule had been killed by the bullet or by its fall, and that in addition to his own bonds, he was pinned to the ground by one leg under that carcass.

A leaning tree up the steep slope cut off the

rays of the moon, casting a deep shadow over and about him, but Grip-sack Sid was able to study out the main points of the situation.

With what was probably its dying struggle, the mule had left the stage-road at an abrupt bend, plunging down the steep slope, over and among ugly rocks, finally stumbling and pitching headlong against a ragged mass of rock that alone kept man and beast from plunging into the river itself.

Fortunately for Harper, it was a head-on collision, and so violent as to kill the mule instantly. The body recoiled, then sunk on its left side. And once again fortune stood by the helpless man.

Less than a foot forward or back, would have crushed his leg to jelly on the rocks. Instead, the limb found a crevice between the two stones, and though sorely compressed, no bones were broken.

By cautious fumbling with his still tethered hands, Grip-sack Sid found that the shock had broken the saddle, and with a little effort he worked the double-hitch from around the splintered pommel, thus gaining considerably more freedom than he had at first.

It was like a good omen, and he just caught himself in the act of starting a cheer, "for luck," when a faint, strange sound from somewhere hard by, came to his ears, making his heart leap wildly for a moment.

His first and most natural thought was that some of the road-agents had discovered him, and were stealing closer to make sure work of their delayed vengeance. His next was of making the best fight practicable under the circumstances, and he swiftly felt for the revolver which he remembered having returned to his hip pocket after firing upon the outlaws.

It was awkward work, owing to his position, but he managed to grip the weapon and draw it forth, though with an ugly doubt whether he had left an unused shell in it or not!

Before he could decide for or against, that peculiar sound was repeated, and now he knew for certain that it came from a human throat. Yet—surely it was a groan, not a chuckle nor a muttered oath?

Strong though his nerves were, Sidney Harper felt little chills running races up and down his spine during those few minutes, as he lay hampered, looking and listening with painful intentness.

For the third time that strange sound came to his ears, and now he felt sure he had fairly located it; just beyond the boulder against which the wounded mule had crushed its thick skull.

Though the collision had been directly end-on, the recoil and fall had turned the animal a little to the left, and by trying, Grip-sack Sid found that he could lift his head and shoulders high enough to peer over the end of the rocky mass, in the direction from whence that hollow groan proceeded.

Fervently wishing that he could send one armed hand in advance of his precious pate, the drummer elongated his neck as much as possible and at the expense of considerable pain in his bruised leg and body, he succeeded in catching a glimpse of his companion in misfortune; for by this time he was fully convinced that only a sufferer could give birth to such a sound as that.

Only a few yards away rolled the river, looking black as jet on either side of the silvery strips where the moonlight fell; but still nearer the boulder, hardly his own length away, in fact, had he been at liberty to stretch himself, Grip-sack Sid caught a glimpse of a bodiless head!

Only a glimpse, for, startled by the sight, Harper was unable to maintain the strain necessary to lift his eyes above the rock, and with a shiver of superstitious awe crawling over him, he sunk back, white-faced and wild-eyed.

He was neither a coward nor a fool, this knight of the grip, even though his present actions and thoughts may lay him open to the charge of being both one and the other. He had gone through with enough to upset any ordinary brain, and had by no means fully rallied from that stunning shock. And so—well, he certainly had gazed upon a human head, the face, white as chalk in part, repulsively colored in other parts, marked with streaks and blotches, turned upward, a faint, gurgling moan escaping the lips even while he gazed—and just as certainly that living head had been without an accompanying body!

For the first time in his life Grip-sack Sid realized what a superstitious man can suffer. But almost as quickly he rallied. He knew what his eyes had told him, but, impossible as it seemed, with that head and face so distinctly outlined in the bright moonshine, without even the shadow of a body joined to it, he knew that a living body must be there, all the same!

And resolved to solve the ugly mystery, he forced himself to rise upward for another look.

Livid and ghastly the head lay just as when he looked before, and now, as then, he could not distinguish aught of body or limbs, until—with another faint groan the head stirred slightly, and a hand came out of the shadow, to quiver in the air for an instant, then drop heavily just above the head.

So much Grip-sack Sid saw, then the strain proved too severe, and he dropped back once more, the ghost of a laugh fluttering on his lips.

"Another poor devil in misery!" flashed through his busy brain. "Who is he? How came he so? More of that red devil's work!"

No longer "it," but "he." For though he had been forced to cut his glance short, Grip-sack Sid had solved the seeming enigma.

The stranger lay partly in the river, his head and shoulders resting on land. The moonlight fell upon the head and face alone, cut off from the body by the tree-top which cast mule and man into dense shade as well.

Only for his recent experience with the road-agents, Harper would hardly have hesitated about trying to rouse the stranger more fully, in hopes of being set at liberty by his hands; but was it so certain he would do this? Would he prove friend or enemy?

That ugly doubt kept Harper silent, and set him to work with all possible energy to free himself.

That life lingered in the stranger, those groans and that hand movement plainly indicated. He might revive at any moment, and though Grip-sack Sid more than half believed this would turn out to be some more of Captain Chameleon's dastardly work, he preferred meeting the stranger on an equal footing, if possible.

Thanks to the breaking of the saddle-bow, Harper was enabled to more fully control the muscles of his body, despite the fact of his leg being pinned to the ground. And remembering the knife in his side pocket, he did his level best to obtain possession of it. With that once secured, and the keen blade opened, he knew the rest would be comparatively easy.

He expected the task would be a tough one, and his anticipations were fully realized. He could reach the opening with the fingers of one hand, but that was as far as he could stretch the thongs that held his wrists touching each other.

Being in his right-side pocket was one point in his favor, but the pocket itself was deep, and though his right leg was elevated by the body of the mule, the strain on his tethered ankles kept the clothes stretched too tightly for him to shake the knife nearer his hand.

He tried to tear the cloth, but it had been chosen for rough service, and defied his uncertain grip. If he could only bring his thumb into play!

He stubbornly persisted until his over-strained muscles failed him for the moment, when he fell back, to rest and think.

He heard the unknown beyond the rock give several groans. He knew that the stranger was reviving, and with his doubts increased by his own helplessness, Grip-sack Sid once more fell to work, this time with a change of tactics.

His fingers were strong and supple as those of a trained pickpocket, and nipping the edge of the pocket between two of them, he tried to roll the cloth upward, drawing the pocket itself outward. Tried and succeeded!

Not all at once, nor without many a discouraging failure; but still it proved to be success, and finally the precious knife slipped into his eager fingers!

After that the work was easy enough. He opened the strongest blade, turned the knife in his palm, then sawed away at the tough thongs until they fell away, leaving both hands at liberty!

A cry of grim delight was rising in his throat, but it was smothered as Grip-sack Sid saw the stranger rising up, to stagger against the very rock in whose shadow he lay. And he heard him huskily mutter:

"Have I—lost it? Did that devil—no!"

He was fumbling in his bosom, it seemed to Harper, and as his hand came forth, grasping a flat package with unsteady fingers, a sigh of great relief and thankfulness broke from his lips.

He seemed to turn faint, whether from gratefulness or some bodily hurt, Grip-sack Sid could only surmise; but he leaned against the rock, almost lying across the top of it, like one nearly swooning.

Protected by the shadow, Harper silently cut the rope about his middle, then made an effort to draw his leg from under the body of the mule. He expected this to be the hardest task of all, but thanks to the depression between the two rocks, his limb moved so readily, after being freed by a slash of the knife at the ankles, that he gave an involuntary cry of joy.

The stranger roused at the sound, gazing hurriedly around, and knowing that discovery was inevitable now, Grip-sack Sid drew his leg free and scrambled to his feet as quickly as possible.

With a choking cry, the stranger started back, and turned as though about to cast himself into the river, hoarsely gasping:

"Never—I'll die first!"

Then Grip-sack Sid sprang forward and grappled with him.

CHAPTER X.

A BROTHER IN DISTRESS.

"HOLD on, you pesky critter!" he cried, sharply, resisting that mad struggle to reach the swiftly flowing water. "Do you want to catch

your death! Don't you know the water's wet and—"

With a savage growl, the unknown twisted his body around far enough to make his hands meet about the throat of his adversary, cutting short that speech, and for a few moments giving the commercial traveler all he wanted to do—and just a trifle more!

For though his left leg seemed sound enough, so far as flesh and bones were concerned, it had been benumbed for so long that now, with the blood set in active motion through each vein, it was almost helpless, leaving Grip-sack Sid in poor condition to fight for life.

But luck was still on his side. That fierce assault was but spasmodic, and the stranger collapsed, falling limp and nerveless in Harper's arms.

So unexpectedly did this happen, that both went down together, narrowly escaping a roll into the river.

"Now you *have* done it haven't you!" ejaculated Grip-sack Sid, relaxing his clutch, but still wary, gazing keenly into the face of the man who lay across his lap.

The struggle, brief as it was, had carried them down into the narrow strip of sand where the stranger had been lying, partly in the water, when Grip-sack Sid first discovered him. But the moon had risen higher, and they were now exposed to its clear light.

Aided by those bright rays, Grip-sack Sid paused for a hasty look at his strange antagonist, shivering a bit as he muttered:

"Ugh! like fighting with a corpse!"

So deathlike did that curiously streaked and blotched face look, framed in jet-black hair, that Harper involuntarily shifted his hand to free his lap of the object.

As he did so, one hand touched a clammy object, and with the movement, a flat package slipped from the bosom of the stranger.

Recognizing the package as the one over which the unknown had muttered those disconnected words, a few minutes earlier, Grip-sack Sid picked it up, looking at it curiously for a moment before slipping it into his bosom.

"Wet—wrapped in oil-skin—wonder what's inside?" he muttered as he took possession of the article.

But more charitable thoughts gained the day as his eyes rested on that ghastly countenance, and after a cautious glance around, to make sure no more dangerous adventure was brewing, Grip-sack Sid gently dragged the unknown back from the water, under shelter of another rock hard by.

His grip still hung at his side, unharmed by all its master had undergone of late, and opening it Harper produced a metal flask, out of which he poured a little good brandy, then held the silver cup to the lips of his patient, supporting his head with a curved arm.

"Good enough!" with a nod of grim approval as the stranger gave signs of lingering life by swallowing the dose. "When a man can suck down fourth-proof brandy so mighty easy, there's lots of kicking left in him—give it time enough!"

Set at rest on that point, Grip-sack Sid examined the patient more carefully, finding a bullet wound in the left shoulder, the lead having passed entirely through without breaking bones, and too high up to have fairly penetrated the cavity.

"Ugly, but not mortal," was his decision, as he resumed his search.

He found another flesh wound, tearing the scalp just above the right ear, but here, as well, the bones appeared to have escaped serious harm, so far as he could tell with only a fingertip as a guide.

The probing extracted a faint groan, and Harper hastened to administer another small dose of the brandy. It was swallowed, but the eyelids merely gave a little flutter. Consciousness was slow in returning, but Harper felt confident all would be well ere long.

Using his knife, he slit the buckskin shirt preparatory to binding up the wound, his old suspicious returning as he noted a curious fact—the stranger was garbed like an Indian, and those ugly streaks and blotches on his face and hands were formed by paint, partly washed off by the water with which his garments were thoroughly soaked.

"White man playing Injun! Crooked, I'll bet a big dollar!" was his conclusion, natural enough under the circumstances.

Harper lowered the man's head to the ground, drawing back a little as he took the package from his bosom, breaking the string and unfolding the oil-skin, to reveal—

"Greenbacks, by glory!"

Though he had only the moonlight to aid his keen eyes, Grip-sack Sid instantly recognized that fact, and, as his trained fingers quickly fluttered over the bills at one end, kept dry by the care with which they had been enveloped, he gave another startled ejaculation:

"Thousand-dollar bills! Twenty of them! Then—"

Who was this stranger? Why had he disguised himself as an Indian? Was he a robber, fleeing with ill-gotten booty, or was he—

"Twenty thousand dollars! The man Cap-

tain Chameleon was after when he tackled me, I'll wager my head!"

In his excitement Grip-sack Sid spoke louder than he thought or knew, and startled out of his stupor by that voice, the stranger lifted his head, supporting his weight on one hand while the other fumbled at his breast, broken words falling from his lips:

"Saved—I've got—where is it! I put—gone—lost!"

Grip-sack Sid swiftly thrust money and cover into his pocket as the stranger staggered wildly to his feet, fearing lest he make another rash attempt to destroy himself in his fierce despair. And quite as much to prevent this as to support the swaying form, Harper caught him in his arms and placed him in a sitting posture on the ground, with the mossy rock at his back.

"Steady, stranger," he said, soothingly, trying to fix those wild eyes with his magnetic gaze. "I'm doing the best I know for you, and if you'll just take another sip of this good brandy, I'll—"

"Have you seen it? Have you got it?" panted the other, eagerly. "Who are you? How came you here? And—"

"I'm a white man, like yourself, and just as honest, I dare be sworn, pardner," laughed Harper. "Captain Chameleon—"

"Curse him! curse him from crown to sole!"

"Amen to that, double over!" nodded Harper, catching that wildly gesticulating hand and pressing it firmly, almost without thought applying a test that was instantly responded to.

Almost instantly the stranger grew calm, gazing eagerly into those steady eyes, while a rapid interchange of signals took place. Just what they were cannot be described in this connection, but it is enough to add that from that moment those two men were as brothers.

"A brother in distress!" softly murmured Harper, all suspicion of evil in connection with this man vanishing as he received the correct answers to all of his tests. "Your name, brother?"

"Evan Morris, of Solid City. And yours?"

"Sidney Harper, from Chicago, bound for Solid City at present. Now, brother, tell me how you fell into distress?"

"I will, but—I had a package which—"

"It fell out of your bosom while I was trying to restore your senses, Morris," said Harper, producing the bundle, adding in explanation of its disordered condition: "I didn't know you, then, and seeing that you had been masquerading as an Indian—"

"In hopes of eluding Captain Chameleon—curse him!"

"Ditto from me!" with a cheerful grin. "But oblige me by seeing if I dropped any of the bills, will you?"

"It's a sacred charge, and not my own property," muttered Morris, a little embarrassed, as he counted the notes before replacing the protecting cover.

"I know. You undertook to carry it to Conrad Hastings, and—"

"How did you guess that?" interrupted the astonished man.

"Well, I hardly reckon it ought to be called a guess," hesitated Harper, rapidly running over what had happened to him that day, in his mind, though this reticence owed nothing to doubts of the perfect honesty of his newly-made friend. "It's quite a long story, and you're hardly fit to stand much more. How's your shoulder feeling?"

Morris gave a faint laugh, cut short by a grimace of pain as he incautiously lifted his left arm.

"I didn't think it was much hurt, but—"

"Only a bullet through it—nothing more!" dryly nodded Harper. "Hardly worth mentioning, is it? And that crack on your skull?"

"A dull, throbbing ache, but nothing serious, I reckon. Though, when I got it, I thought my skull was bored clean through!"

"It wasn't the fault of whoever stood at the other end of the gun, anyway! If he didn't shoot to kill, then the pesky critter is too mighty careless to be trusted with anything more dangerous than a potato popgun! Reckon you know who he was?"

It was Evan Morris's turn to hesitate, now, and Harper generously gave him the necessary time for reflection, by quickly adding:

"All of which helps remind me that I lost a bit of hide my own lucky self, in much the same fashion!" gingerly feeling of his shoulder, where a bullet had broken the skin when his mule wheeled to take flight from the road-agents for the second time. "Good enough! I reckoned it went deeper, from the sting; but I'll hardly go broke paying for court-plaster, this trip, anyhow!"

"You were shot at, then?" ventured Morris, a little dubiously.

Though he knew what a sacred bond united them, as members of the same glorious order of brotherhood, he still had vague doubts. No doubt these were born of his important trust, on which so much depended, and to save which for his uncle he had dared and suffered so much already.

Then, too, he had only recently joined the

Order, and naturally had less implicit faith in its powers for good.

"I was," laughingly nodded Harper, recognizing but ignoring those doubts. "I was held up by Captain Chameleon and his gang. He accused me of trying to smuggle a big pile of money into Solid City without paying toll at his gate. And so—well, I'm out a mule, and in a good bit of experience."

"Money? Solid City? You don't mean that he—"

Morris left the query incomplete, but Grip-sack Sid readily finished it, saying with a laughing nod:

"Reckon that's just about the size of it, pardner. The worthy rascal insisted that I was trying to smuggle \$20,000 in cash into Solid City for the benefit of Conrad Hastings, whoever that gentleman may be."

"He is my uncle."

"I began to suspect something of the sort," with a dry laugh. "Of course I pleaded not guilty as indicted, but Captain Chameleon wouldn't have it that way. He probed every square inch of my outside, and if he had thought to arm himself with an emetic, I seriously doubt if my interior department would have fared any better! Then, when he couldn't do any better, his imps trussed me up, mule-back, with face where my rear ought to have been, and started me off to the tune of 'Old Hickory!'"

Partly disguising his real sufferings with light quips, Grip-sack Sid gave an account of what followed, ending by describing how he came to find Morris, and save him from a watery grave.

"And now, pardner, if you've weighed and found me not wanting, how would it do for you to give me a brief account of your own adventures?"

"If—if it was only *my own* interests!" hesitated Evan.

"I had the money. You were helpless as though already dead. Instead of making off with the boodle, as I might have done, or of pushing you back into the drink, which would have been just as easy, I treated you as one brother should treat another, though at the time in ignorance of the fact that you were really a brother workman."

"I'm not telling you all this, simply to exact your gratitude, Mr. Morris. I'd rather do without your confidence altogether than to win it after such a fashion. But—it *does* grieve me to find a brother who has profited so little by the grand precepts of our Order, as to for even an instant entertain doubts of a brother, after he has given full proof of his worthiness. Now—good-night, Brother Morris!"

"Wait—I was wrong—I see it now!" quickly cried Evan.

CHAPTER XI.

A PUZZLE ALL AROUND.

GRIP-SACK SID paused at his third step, looking dubiously over his shoulder, but gave no signs of turning back beyond that. Morris felt that he had foolishly thrown away a chance, just when he most needed help, and brokenly muttered:

"I didn't mean—I'm all broken up, brother!"

"Well, we'll do our level best to save the pieces, brother," laughed Harper, returning to greet his new friend as though they had just met after a parting of years. "And as a starter, let me tackle that hole in your shoulder, old fellow."

"It can wait—I tell you—"

"And I tell you that when I play doctor, I'm doctor all over," interrupted Harper, forcing the young man back to an easy position, then settling about dressing his hurts with all the skill of an old hand. "And if my patients aren't ill enough to obey my orders without any buts or ifs or ands, the first thing I do is to give 'em a dose that knocks all such ideas out of their heads in a holy hurry. So—take a delicate suck at the bottle, and then prepare to admire my motions!"

Once or twice Evan Morris attempted to speak, but just as often Grip-sack Sid choked him off, until he had attended to both wounds, calling his grip into play, finding in it everything a physician or a surgeon could wish for, apparently.

"And that's not much, to simmer it down," he cheerily asserted, on that same point. "It's the quack who tries to frighten disease out of the poor devil who falls into his clutches by a display of pills and potions, bottles and butchering tools. Now see—a little pure water, a couple of rags, covered with salve—Magic Salve, by the way, invented by a worthy brother of ours, Francisco Bebeemoth Dewey, of Kansas—a bandage, and—presto!"

"How can I thank you—a stranger?" gratefully muttered Morris, whose usual nerve had apparently been severely shaken by his recent peril and sufferings.

"Don't try it, brother," was the instant response, all trace of jesting vanishing from face and voice. "I found you in trouble—"

"And I repaid you by doubting—I did!" turning his face quickly aside as Harper attempted to slip a silencing hand over his lips. "My only

excuse lies in the fact that this secret is not my own."

"You were right to guard it, and so let the matter drop."

"No. I've had time to think it over, and if you will, I'd prefer making a clean breast of it, now. Because—sounds mighty selfish, doesn't it?" with a faint smile as their eyes met. "Because I'm so badly broken up I'll have to beg your help to town!"

"A blind man leading a cripple!" laughed Harper, with a blank gaze around them. "Wish I had as many dollars as I don't know where we are! Still, maybe I can smell out the road in time."

"I'll show you a shorter cut than by the stage-trail, after I've explained how I came in this fix. You will listen to me, brother?"

"All the rest of the night, if that'll make you any easier."

Without waiting for further permission, Evan Morris began:

"You can guess why I was startled by the mention of that name, when I say that I owe these two hurts, as well as my bath in the river, to that same demon—Captain Chameleon!"

"Then he *did* hold you up?"

"He tried his level best, but I took long chances, and though he hit me twice I managed to get away from him, as you see. More through the mercy of Providence than by my own wit or skill, though!"

"I wonder—what time was it, about, when he held you up?"

"About an hour by sun, and some three miles further up the river."

"The road follows the river, then, of course?"

"No. The road crosses at a ford half a mile above this, then bends to the left, while the river turns to the right, passing between the two ridges. I was not following the road, for I feared being waylaid if I should try that. And then, in my rig-out as Indian, on a hunt for meat, I knew it would be foolish to keep close to the trail."

Grip-sack Sid gave a low, thoughtful whistle, pinching his chin as he gazed into that face, still disfigured with streaks of paint. Evan Morris surely must have made a mistake as to the time of day, or else—what?

"You are sure that it wasn't later than that? Sure that it wasn't nearer sundown?" he slowly asked.

"I'm positive I'm not ten minutes wrong, one way or the other," was the prompt reply. "I know, for I was just figuring it out that I'd have time to reach Solid City by the line I'd laid out a little after dusk. I didn't care to get there earlier, for we agreed that it was best to give no occasion for gossip, and in the dusk I would run less risk of being recognized beneath my disguise."

"And you say Captain Chameleon held you up? Did he have on his army overcoat, or was he in all his crimson glory, as I saw him last?"

"Crimson—you mean his red suit? No. He was dressed in a suit of yellow, from crown to sole: yellow as gold!"

"An hour by sun. Not on the stage road, but in the hills three miles from this spot. Rigged out in a yellow suit. Captain Chameleon. And after twenty thousand dollars. Have I summed it up about right, Morris?"

"In every particular—yes!" was the instant response.

"Then—whose monkey is it in the meal-chest?—for at that very hour, Captain Chameleon was holding up the stage from Centropolis to Solid City, on the regular route, at least a mile below where we now stand!"

"It can't be, man!"

"But it is, all the same. And unless you are mistaken in your notion of the time, place and dress there are *two* Captain Chameleons at work in this quarter, and each one red-hot after that boodle!"

Morris seemed bewildered and Harper was not a little bothered over this discovery, though the latter was the first to rally, and as the surest method of winning more light on the subject, he questioned the young man more closely concerning the money, what it was needed so greatly for, ending in extracting pretty much the same account of the Singed Cat Mine as that given Ida Fenwick by Harlow Crampton.

Taken in connection with what they each had suffered that day, the story was sufficiently interesting to make them oblivious to the passing minutes, their own poor condition, and the prospect of still further trouble before they could count on repose or safety.

After telling pretty much all that has been recorded in a prior chapter, Morris went on to explain his present predicament. He had, with the hardly-won consent of his uncle, Conrad Hastings, volunteered to secretly leave Solid City and strike across country to Hanover, where he expected to secure the money for which Hastings had provided in advance. He succeeded in procuring the money, despite his disguise, thanks to a letter of instructions which Hastings sent through the mail in ample time, and another note of identification which he bore with him. He made the return trip without event worthy of note, until safety seemed almost within his grasp.

Then, when he least expected it, though he kept constantly on his guard, a man garbed in yellow—buckskin or velveteen, he fancied—sprung up from cover with ready revolver, bidding him halt and deliver.

He knew then that his disguise was penetrated, and his precious charge in danger. He ducked, drawing and firing at the same time. He received a bullet through his shoulder, but he fled at top speed, making for the river, not far away. He sprang from a high ledge into this, and when his head broke above the surface, another shot struck him.

"That is all I remember, up to your finding me, brother!" he ended.

"Quite enough, too, and quite a mindful when you join it to my experience with the gentleman in red. I've always heard that chameleons are marvelous critters to change colors, but—well, I really *can't* make it come right that a two-legged chameleon can change both color and location so mighty sudden. And so—either *your* yellow man, or *my* red fellow, is a rank impostor! And—come to think—it really isn't worth while to rack our brains over the enigma while we have something else so much more important on hand, getting out o' the wilderness, so to speak!"

"I'm not so sure of myself, but you're not so badly bungled up, and if you will—" hesitated Morris, drawing the package from his breast and holding it out, as he hurriedly added: "You're best able to guard it, brother. As a brother, I ask you to see that this reaches Conrad Hastings's hands in safety!"

"We'll both get there, or neither, brother."

"Don't say that," pressing the package into Harper's reluctant hands. "You can't begin to guess what a cunning, malicious demon Captain Chameleon has proved himself! He may intercept us, even by the trail I'm going to show you. If he *should*—give no thought to me, I implore you, but fight or slip through—*anything*, just so you put this into the hands of my uncle!"

He spoke feverishly, like one hardly conscious of his own words, and fearing to cross him just then, Grip-sack Sid accepted the package and secured it on his person.

"I'll do my level best to prove worthy the trust, brother," he said, gravely, then passing a supporting arm about the slender figure of his new-found friend. "Lean on your uncle, boy, and just nod which way we're to take."

"Down the river—it'll be smoother walking after a bit," was the faint answer. "Half a mile or so, then there's a ford where we can cross the river."

Rather indefinite directions for a stranger on unknown ground, but Grip-sack Sid asked no further questions. From the manner in which Morris leaned upon him, he knew that a reaction was coming, and though he had little fears for the ending, provided the young man could receive even ordinary care, with repose of mind as of body, he was fully as anxious to reach Solid City as Evan could possibly be.

As Morris had said, they were soon out of the region of thick-lying bowlders, and as the walking improved, Grip-sack Sid fell to pondering over the strange events of that afternoon.

He had heard rumors of a road-agent who called himself Captain Chameleon, long before coming into the locality which appeared to be his main "stamping grounds." He had every reason to believe that the man in red, whom he had seen rolling on the ground after his backward shot, was the "original Jacobs," both from his manner of working, and from his backing of toughs.

Then, granting this, who was the "Yellow Chameleon?"

That was a query not so easily answered, though the longer he reflected over the story told by Evan Morris about the Singed Cat Mine and the men who were trying to "freeze out" Conrad Hastings, the stronger grew his belief that the man in yellow was one of those two pards!

"Not Adolph Mohr, for his build don't correspond, if Morris drew their portraits aright," he mused. "Paul Pickett, then? Who else would even think of holding up an Injun buck? Who else could possibly guess that a red-skin lad had such a pile as \$20,000 about his rags?"

Beginning to believe that he had found a clew to the mystery, Grip-sack Sid ventured to ask Morris a few questions, hoping through the answers to win more light; but with poor success.

The young man seemed to grow worse instead of better, and feeling this, Harper stopped to give him a brief rest.

"No—go on—go on!" huskily muttered Morris, feverishly.

Harper coaxed him to take a sup of brandy, and this seemed to lend him a fresh supply of strength. At any rate, he pressed on at a more rapid gait, and seeing that argument would only make matters worse, Grip-sack Sid gave over, supporting those unsteady steps as best he might, along through the mingled light and shadows.

With his own progress impeded after this fashion, Harper felt confident that they had already covered more than the distance mentioned by Morris, and he was about to suggest

as much, with a more pointed question concerning the location of the ford by means of which they were to cross the river without wading or swimming, when he stopped short, with a low ejaculation of surprise, not unmixed with dismay.

For there, only a few rods ahead, and directly in their course, he caught sight of a twinkling light! And as he turned his head to ask Morris what that meant, he gave another sharp exclamation.

CHAPTER XII.

A PAIR OF DARK EYES.

WITHOUT a word, a sigh, a sound of warning, Evan Morris sunk in a limp and nerveless heap at the feet of his companion.

So suddenly did this happen, that Grip-sack Sid, taken completely by surprise, was not quick enough to save the young man from a fall.

Stooping, he shook Morris by an arm, peeping anxiously into his face for a moment, then hurriedly placing a hand over his heart. It was beating, though feebly. The young man was not dead, though he was certainly unconscious.

"Worn out—loss of blood—and all the rest!" muttered Grip-sack Sid, drawing back with a dark frown, turning his eyes instinctively toward the twinkling light, still visible through the shadows cast by an overhanging mass of bush-clad rocks.

"Too small for a camp-fire. Too steady to be burning out of doors, even with so little breeze stirring. So—a light in the window—whom? That's the question?"

Who could be living in this out of the way region? For, now that he had taken a second look, Grip-sack Sid felt confident that the light came through a window, and consequently there must be a habitation of some sort hidden among those black shadows.

For himself, he would preferred passing on to reach Solid City as soon as might be, to running any chances of getting into another possible scrape. But he had Evan Morris to think of, and he feared that further journeying was over for him, at least without food and rest.

His right hand sought a weapon, his left moving toward the packet of money in his bosom. Only for that, a trust sacred in that it had been given him in the name of his loved Order, he would not have hesitated another moment before hailing the unseen house and asking hospitality for the wounded man.

"Dollars to cents I'm making a mountain out of a mole-hill!" he muttered, in half-disgust at his own prudence. "Some honest old hunter, or hermit, or prospector, no doubt. And yet—there's more than my own life at stake, and I'll swallow my cowardice fer once!"

Only pausing long enough to see that Evan Morris was still unconscious, and likely to remain thus long enough not to endanger his projected movements, Grip-sack Sid put fresh cartridges into his revolver, and holding it at his hip, stole silently toward that twinkling light.

It was only a few rods distant, and as he drew nearer to it, he made out the lines of a rough stone cabin, nearly covered over with clambering vines. And then, cautiously keeping to one side, exposing his face as little as possible to the light streaming through the uncurtained window, he peered through the glass.

So far as he could see, there was only one inmate; a young woman who sat before the glowing embers in the stone fireplace, leaning over with elbows on her knees, and chin upheld by her joined palms. She was apparently lost in a reverie, though this could hardly have been an unpleasant one judging from what Grip-sack Sid could see of her face.

That was comely, if not beautiful, though her hand concealed the greater portion of one side. Her profile was visible, outlined against the wall beyond, and that was regular, clear and clean-cut.

Feeling not a little abashed by playing the spy after this fashion on one so young and maidenly, Grip-sack Sid drew back after one comprehensive glance over the room: in which, among other things, he noted a table, covered with a snowy-white spread, bearing a plentiful supply of food.

"Waiting for—*whom*?" he muttered beneath his breath, as he retraced his steps to where he had left Evan Morris. "No matter! I'm hungry as a wolf, not to speak of this poor fellow, who ought to have a little substantial filling to stiffen his backbone. And so—"

Brief as had been his absence on that reconnoitering expedition, the moon had shifted until a ray fell across the face of his friend, bringing those ugly paint-streaks into relief.

Although he was pretty well convinced that they had naught to dread from the owners of that little stone cabin, Grip-sack Sid felt that it would be bad policy to awaken any unnecessary suspicions. And so, saturating his handkerchief in the river which ran not far way, he washed off the paint as thoroughly as possible.

The friction, aided by the coolness of the dampened cloth, served to partially revive Morris, and Grip-sack Sid asked him who lived in the cabin.

"Jameson—all right—but home—*must go*

home!" faintly mumbled the young man, striving to regain his feet.

"All right: we're going, brother," soothingly said Harper, his last fear vanishing at that assurance. "But we'll get a bite and a sup first, fer—"

There was no use to complete the sentence, for Morris dropped across his arm, once more nearly if not quite unconscious. And carrying him a little closer to the front of the cabin, Grip-sack Sid shouted:

"Hallo! Hallo the house!"

With a delay of only the fraction of a minute, the door swung open and a trim, graceful figure was outlined against the light, one hand poising a revolver as a clear voice called out:

"What's wanted, and who are ye that calls so loud the night?"

"White men, and honest, ma'am," promptly responded Harper, lifting Morris in his strong arms and advancing. "I've a sick man here, and in the name of your kind sex, I ask for shelter. For him, if not myself."

"Shelter, is it? Then ye're running away from somebody or something, may be?" hesitated the woman, shading her eyes with her empty hand, peering through the shadows.

"Well," hesitated Harper, but remembering that the bandage about Evan's head could not be concealed were they to enter the light. "Well, since ye're a lady, I don't reckon there's any harm in telling the whole truth. We've had a bit of racket with a pack of road-agents, and my friend got hit once or twice."

"Road-agents!" ejaculated the young woman, as though startled by his words. "Sure, man, was it that thafe o' the worrld, Captain Chameleon?"

With that epithet for a cue, Grip-sack Sid was at no loss how to act, and promptly said:

"I reckon he was the boss, for he wore a red rig and—"

"Come in, come in, man!" interrupted the young woman, briskly. "Sure I'd give aid and shelter to a mangy dog if I thought it could spite that same—Mary forgive me! but I almost said *devil*!"

Without waiting for further invitation, Grip-sack Sid carried his moaning friend into the cabin, the young woman closing the door after them, dropping her pistol on the table and hurrying to assist Harper in reviving the wounded youth.

Her tongue was almost as ready as her hands, and without having the trouble of asking questions, Grip-sack Sid was shortly in possession of the following facts concerning the cabin and its inmates.

It had been built by Michael Jameson, who lived there with his only child, the young woman whose tongue was rattling on so glibly, and whose given name was Norah.

Jameson had "struck indications" hard by, while prospecting, with his headquarters at Solid City. Then, to be nearer his work, he had put up this cabin on his claim when duly recorded, and there they had lived ever since.

"And a weary, lonesome life it has been, barring the good father o' me, d'ye mind, man!" sighed pretty Norah in conclusion.

For she was pretty, as Grip-sack Sid felt free to admit when once he had time to fairly scan her comely face and regular features, with a rosy glow in her cheeks and the light of perfect health in her big dark eyes.

But this inspection was made only after Evan Morris had regained his senses, and plainly betrayed the fact that long fasting had quite as much to do with his weakness as loss of blood and fatigue. And as Norah read as much, they accepted her invitation to sit at the table and eat, quite as frankly as it was given.

"Sure, there's more where that came from, such as it is, d'ye mind," she said, with a light laugh while helping them both. "And since daddy Jameson lingers so late in town, he'll be willing to wait a bit longer for Norah to cook up a fresh supply—so he will, now!"

To all seeming, Sidney Harper never felt more entirely at ease in his life while he sat eating, or after his hunger was appeased and he had pushed his chair away from the table. Yet inwardly he was sorely troubled by one singular fact.

Norah and Evan had recognized each other, as their words plainly proved. Yet, though asking plenty of questions on other points, Norah never mentioned, never seemed to notice the unusual dress worn by Evan.

A seemingly trifling fact, but still one that gave birth to many uncomfortable suspicions in Harper's brain. For Norah had a rare pair of dark eyes; so had Lieutenant Lizard!

And Grip-sack Sid, by a seemingly awkward movement, had touched the lieutenant's full chest plainly enough to feel positive that no man ever carried such a firm, yet elastic bosom beneath his clothes!

Because of these uncomfortable suspicions, foundationless though they might, and probably would, prove on investigation, Grip-sack Sid was willing enough to second Evan's proposal that they resume their journey to Solid City.

Norah protested, saying that she would always feel as though she had abetted Mr. Morris in committing suicide if she permitted him to

depart in the night, while so weak and poorly; but her words were wasted, further than winning for her kindness a double amount of thanks from both men.

Morris declared that he felt perfectly well, now he had eaten such a generous meal, and drank such excellent coffee. And so, following them past the door, still lamenting their obstinacy, Norah Jameson was forced to see her guests depart.

Evan Morris had not been altogether playing a part in making his assertions, but he had hardly passed out of sight of that still open door when another spell of vertigo overcame him, and Grip-sack Sid was forced to lend him support, gently moving him out of the path to where a gnarly, twisted, deformed old tree was growing.

"Haden't you better go back to the house, pardner?" asked Harper, a little dubiously, standing with one hand resting against a huge knot protruding from the trunk, a foot or two above his head. "I can make heap sight quicker time alone, with you in this condition. I'll place your trust in the hands of your uncle, then come back after, with men to guard and material for shaping a litter. Better, I think!"

"To guard—what do you suspect?" a little sharply asked Evan, rallying at even this dim suspicion of danger—not to himself, but to his sacred charge.

"Well, nothing, if you put it that way, pardner," slowly replied the commercial traveler. "But after what we've both experienced of Captain Chameleon and his double, there's no harm in playing careful."

Morris laughed faintly. He had no fears of harm coming to himself even from those lawless hands, unless he should be caught with the money in his possession. He said as much, while refusing to even think of remaining behind in Norah's care.

"I'd be safe enough there, of course, but I'm not thinking of myself. So—I'm steadier now, and plenty able to go ahead."

He turned away from the tree, but Grip-sack Sid hesitated a moment or two before following, as though not yet ready to give up the notion he had taken. But he overtook Morris before the young man reached the series of stepping-stones by means of which a footman might cross the river dry-shod.

"You're bound to go ahead? Is it because you haven't learned to fully trust me—a brother?" softly muttered Harper.

Morris gave his strong hand a silent grip which answered that reproach, and then they passed over the river, an easy task with the full moon shining down upon the flat stones.

They pressed on at a fair pace, Morris seeming much stronger, and had lost sight of the river, when, without a single premonitory sound by way of warning, a dark figure barred the way, pistols in hand, with the harsh, menacing challenge:

"Hands up! Resist, and out goes your light forever!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

WHEN that confused alarm broke forth, both Miss Fenwick and Harlow Crampton paused, turning on the last step but one of the short flight leading up to the porch or veranda running along the front of the Tip-top Hotel.

After their recent experience, it is not so much to be wondered at that their fancy should conjure up much the same grim object; the red-garbed figure of Captain Chameleon, come to complete the evil work begun out yonder on the Centropolis trail.

What really greeted their wide eyes, when those clattering hoofs brought horse and rider into the circle of brighter light cast around the front of the hotel, was in such strong contrast to the vision they anticipated, that neither woman nor man could do more than stare in amaze at that ridiculous spectacle, at first.

Recognizing the fantastically arrayed rider, Crampton was the first to break that spell, spluttering thickly:

"Good Lawd o' love! Jonah Rice! City marshal! Cuttin' up sech darn fool' didoes as them! In petticoats! An' a night-cap! An' a—fore a lady, too!"

The final explosion came like a shot from a gun, and honest Crampton turned rosy red, blushing for the credit of his own town, when one of its most responsible officials could make such a public display of himself and his naturally depraved tastes.

"Dug-gun ye!" Crampton almost howled, shaking a fat fist at Jonah Rice, whose mad progress was just then arrested by strong and willing hands. "Might 'a' had common decency 'nough fer to put on a dress, anyhow, ye pesky onmanerly—"

His indignant protest was cut short by a musical sound, as Miss Fenwick, with a strong sense of the ludicrous, broke into a laugh. It was a bit hysterical, too, for she had been sorely tried that day, both mentally and physically. And this ridiculous object, filling the place of that handsome if detestable figure which she had anticipated at the first notes of alarm, proved too much for her natural reserve.

"Don't ye be skeered, ma'am, honey!" began Crampton, in a soothing tone of voice, misinterpreting her emotion; but before he could finish what was in his mind, another figure caught his eye and he cried out:

"Land o' love, neighbor! but I'm powerful glad to see ye! Was jest thinkin' of—let me interduce ye to—all right, both o' ye!"

For, already warned by that musical laugh, Conrad Hastings had eyes and words and thoughts only for that graceful figure under the red glow of the lanterns. And though she was about the last person on earth whom he expected to encounter at that hour and place, it only needed a single glimpse of that fair, blonde face to tell him the truth.

"Ida—child—how came you here?" he cried, in strongly agitated tones, at the same time clasping her in his arms and drawing her gladly yielding form to his bosom with a warmth that more than made amends for his hasty words.

"Papa! you are not—I just had to come!"

Only Conrad Hastings could fairly catch those half-sobbing words as Ida hid her face in his bosom, after that one swift kiss and eager look; but there was such a hysterical echo in the tone that, fearing "a scene" before so many witnesses, he used all practicable haste in removing his daughter from public.

He had not recognized Crampton at all. Drawn from the hotel by the uproar, almost the first thing he saw was that familiar figure, the first thing he heard was that sweet voice.

And in this glad reunion, after passing through such trying scenes, Ida Fenwick can hardly be blamed if she, too, acted just as though no such person as Harlow Crampton drew the breath of life.

"Waal, I ain't kickin'!" that worthy gentleman mentally declared, with a fleeting look after the retreating figures. "Time 'nough in the mornin', an' this is heap sight more fun!"

Leading his daughter to the end of the veranda where the crowd was thinnest, Conrad Hastings helped her down the steps and through the bustling, laughing, jeering, excited but as yet good-natured ranks, turning into the first side street, preferring the gloom to longer stay in the midst of so much uproar and turbulence.

Not until they had fairly left the crowd behind them and were picking their way along a not over-smooth road, did Hastings break the silence which had fallen upon them both after that brief interchange of words in front of the hotel.

"How, in the name of all that's marvelous! did you get here, Ida?" he ejaculated, turning his head to peer into her loved face.

"By the stage, papa," was her reply, and somehow it sounded so ridiculously matter-of-fact that each of them burst into a laugh, genuine if not heartily loud.

That mutual laugh served to set both at greater ease, and it was with a little less guilty feeling that she had performed not only an unmaidenly act in making such a perilous journey without warning or an escort, but had brought fresh complications into a life already too full of care and trouble by so acting, but Ida murmured with a long and deep sigh of relief:

"And you're taking me home, papa? How delicious that sounds! Home! And I've just boarded nearly all my life!"

"I hoped to have sent for you long ere this, pretty pet," said her father, with a sigh of quite a different nature. "But—well—"

"Don't begin to scold me—so soon, papa dear!" murmured Ida, giving his arm a squeeze and his face an appealing look from her big, lustrous blue eyes. "I know I ought to be—well, that I acted very rashly in not first obtaining your permission to come. But—I was not quite sure you would give me that, and so— And I've had a scare quite big enough to punish me all I deserve, too!"

"What do you mean by scare? Surely you haven't—"

"Yes; we were held up—isn't that the correct term?" as Conrad Hastings gave a sharp start and uttered a broken cry.

"Not by—was it Captain Chameleon?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Yes; he said that was his name, or title, and—"

"Thank Heaven! he was after the stage, not—"

Cutting himself short, and bidding Ida have patience until they were safely under their own roof, Hastings neither asked nor answered any more questions while in the open air.

Though lively and prosperous enough, Solid City was not very extensive, and a few minutes' brisk walking sufficed to carry father and daughter to his house, a comfortable frame building of two stories, thanks to the plentiful supply of timber along the hills, and to the enterprising fellow who had faith enough in Solid City to freight the more important parts going to form a saw-mill over the range.

Hastings had built this more than a year before, when he expected to send for his daughter to come and live with him; but then arose the complications with the Singed Cat pards, and that invitation had never been sent.

Yet the speculator did not live alone. Evan Morris and his widowed mother lived with Con-

rad Hastings. The one was called nephew by the mine owner, the other sister-in-law, though the tie of kindred was almost as much fiction as reality, since Mrs. Morris had been only a step-sister to Mr. Hastings's first wife, Ida being the sole offspring of his second wife by her first husband.

The arrival of Ida Fenwick at home was no less a surprise to Mrs. Morris than it had been to the gentleman who had simply walked down town to see if any mail had come for him by the stage; but after many greetings and many aimless words on both sides, supper was prepared and eaten. And then, drawing up in front of the open fireplace where resinous pine knots were glowing, father and daughter settled down for a confidential talk.

"And now, pretty pet," he murmured, softly, patting her smooth cheek as it rested near his shoulder, and making use of his favorite term of endearment, dating back to her infancy almost. "I'm awfully glad to see you, of course, but—why did you come like this?"

"Because I knew from your letters that you needed some one to comfort you, to cuddle you, to cheer you up, daddy dear! And because—because I felt just as sad and lonely and—I just had to come!"

Hastings echoed that sigh, but his arm crept closer around that yielding waist, and his cheek rested on those silken locks of gold.

"If you could have suspected how much I needed that comfort and cuddling, pretty pet, you would have been here long ago!"

"Oh, papa! And you are scolding me because I did come, even now?"

"Not scolding; only—I do regret your coming, Ida, for your own sake," his tones growing grave and troubled as he stared into the fire. "Because there is trouble ahead—trouble all around me now."

"I know something about it, papa," nodded Ida, straightening up, her blue eyes glowing, her fair face growing firm and resolute. "Mr. Crampton told me about your trouble with that queerly-named mine."

"The Singed Cat? I wish he had been more prudent!"—frowningly.

"Don't blame him, papa. Captain Chameleon began it when he swore that I was trying to convey a great sum of money—"

"What! did that devil dare—"

A soft, warm palm covered his lips, and then Ida Fenwick hastily but clearly narrated her peculiar adventure with the red road-agent.

After permitting her to begin, Hastings listened to the end without interruption, only his pale face and glowing eyes betraying his intense interest in the recital.

He shivered and turned paler when Ida told how Captain Chameleon had fallen before the shot of the man on the mule, but even then he asked no questions, though an ugly fear was haunting him.

Again he showed equal agitation in hearing of the proposed retention of the maiden for ransom, his brows contracting and his eyes filling with fresh trouble at the bare idea.

When Ida finished, he asked her to describe as nearly as possible the man on the mule, drawing a long breath of relief as he noted the wide difference between her description and the appearance of Evan Morris, his nephew.

Then he again showed his thankfulness that Captain Chameleon had been at work along the stage road, explaining his reasons by telling how Evan had volunteered to bring the money from Hanover, through the mountains. For, if the road-agent was busied in that quarter, looking for the money by the regular channel of communication with the outside world, he surely could not even suspect the truth. And as Evan counted on reaching Solid City that very evening, all bade fair to end well.

Ida listened to all this with glowing eyes and breathless interest. Though they had met only once during the past few years, she felt an interest in Evan almost if not quite as strong as he felt in her. And with both the affection was far stronger than is usually to be found between cousins of so remote a degree.

But of this, of course, Ida made no mention, and after contenting herself with a fervent hope that Evan would soon be with them, she abruptly turned the conversation upon the Singed Cat pards.

Her questions showed that she had been busily thinking since Harlow Crampton gave her what information he possessed, and while answering her as fully as he could, Conrad Hastings marveled greatly how she could have mastered the situation so thoroughly.

"Because I've come to help, not hinder you, papa," was her grave, earnest answer. "Because I'm the only boy—save Evan—you've got, and I don't like to see so many ugly wrinkles coming into your dear face! And so—do you know what I've fully decided, father?"

"How should I know? Such a marvelous brain! Such a wonderful—"

"Please don't laugh, daddy, darling!" giving him a little hug and a big smack. "For I'm terribly in earnest. And I know—I just know that I can point out your secret enemy!"

"Who can that be but Captain Chameleon?"

"And who can Captain Chameleon be? Who

but one of those villains who are trying to cheat you out of your property, even as they robbed you of your money! Who but one of the Singed Cat pards!"

"Impossible! You don't know how—"

"How one of them was robbed by Captain Chameleon? By his partner in disguise, rather! For who else among your enemies can have a woman to help them, save the Singed Cat pards!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A HERO IN PETTICOATS.

THERE was something in the tone and manner of Billy Trego, the driver of the Centropolis stage, as he so sharply questioned City Marshal John Rice, that instinctively called a halt among the boisterous crowd of amused citizens who surrounded that ridiculously attired gentleman. A something, too, that made the tall officer temporarily forget his uncomfortable situation, still securely bound to his saddle.

Question and answer followed in swift succession, broken only by that fierce cry as Billy Trigger leaped from his box to the ground, with flaming face and doubled fists.

"It's a darn lie! An' you're a howlin' liar from 'way back, Jonah Rice! You hain't bin held up by no Cap'n Chameleon, n'r he didn't w'ar no blue clo'es, n'r he never—durn a liar, anyway! An' I kin mop the hull town with your long-geard karkass ontel you cain't—git down out o' that saddle, an' smell o' yer master—smell o' yer mist'ess!"

Fairly boiling over with rage, Billy Trigger pranced around in front of the hero in petticoats, leaping up and cracking his heels together as he thrust first one tightly clinched fist after the other as near that hooked nose as the difference in their altitude would allow.

"Git out—you!" snarled Rice, jerking his head back as often as those grimy knuckles menaced his most prominent feature. "I'll hev the law onto ye ef—"

"Darn the law! Darn you! Darn everybody that sticks up fer sech as you!" howled Billy Trigger, growing hotter and more furious as the crowd, too hugely tickled to permit their sport to be ended too soon, adroitly yet with seeming awkwardness interfered to keep him from fairly climbing up his detested antagonist.

"The p'izen little critter is gone clean crazy, gents, an'—"

"I kin lick the man as calls me crazy! I kin lick—you ain't got on your star, now, Jonah Rice, an' the law cain't kiver ye so deep I won't punch the daylight clean out o' your long—oh, why don't ye tum'le off'm that crow-bait? Why don't ye—set him up afore me, gents, an' look how mighty double quick I'll pull his feathers off an' show ye what a—smell o' yer master! smell o' yer mist'ess!"

But once more Billy Trigger was cut off from his enemy by a number of laughing, hooting, yelling citizens, seemingly bent on prolonging the "circus," while protesting that all they wanted was fair play for both men.

"Light, Jonah, and sweep the section with him!" was one sentence that the marshal managed to catch, and that recalled his comparatively helpless situation to his bewildered brain.

"How kin I?" he cried, unsteadily, holding up his bound hands and giving his gaunt frame a twist and contortion that revealed the lasso wound about his middle, then firmly secured to the saddle, front and rear. "Me trussed up like a dead duck fer roastin'! An' him full heeled! Ef he shoots, it'll be bloody murder—no less!"

"Darn the shoot! I don't hev to shoot! I kin lick any darned liar that'll hev the cheek to git up an' tell me I don't know what I do know with the own two eyes o' me!" Cap'n Chameleon! In a blue rig-out! A hour by sun! On the Black Water trail! An' all the time Cap'n Chameleon, in a red rig-out, was hevin' his both han's chuck full a-holdin' up yen' very stage—yes he was! An' I kin prove it, too!"

At these words—howled forth at the top of an unusually healthy voice, a sudden hush fell upon the crowd. Even Jonah Rice was temporarily stunned into gaping amazement.

Up to this moment Harlow Crampton had remained a silent but vastly amused witness, for he, in common with a majority of the citizens, had no particular love for the city marshal as either man or officer; but now the old gentleman lifted his voice in strong confirmation of Billy Trego's assertion.

"Thar's either a mighty mistake floatin' loose, or else thar's a whale of a lie out somewhars!" he declared, in conclusion.

"Call it a lie, an' I'll p'int out the liar!" chipped in Billy Trigger, quieted for the moment, but by no means subdued. "Thar he sets, an' sure as his name is Jonah Rice, I kin punch the truth out o' him! Jest let me get at him—jest fer oncel!"

"Steady, pardner!" sternly cried Crampton, coming to the assistance of the men who were holding the irate driver back. "Mebbe 'tain't all a lie. Mebbe 'tain't nothin' wuss than a joke, or—"

"Does this yer' look so mighty much like a joke?" dolefully spluttered the marshal, flinging

out his long arms, now set at liberty by a friend. "Do I look like I was playin' off a joke?"

It was an unlucky appeal to come from his lips, just then. The lugubrious questions brought back that briefly quelled hilarity, and once more the yells and howls of side-splitting laughter rent the air.

"He looks more like a 'piscopal gospel-sharp!" cried one of the crowd; and catching at the hint, a score of merry fellows crowded about the luckless fellow, setting him free from his bonds and out of the saddle.

"Yar's a bar'l fer a pulpit!" cried another fun-loving sport, rolling a cask across the street until checked by the close-crowded mass of legs and bodies. "Hyste him up—hev a sarmon!"

"Hold on! Easy!" fairly howled Rice, as he was hustled back and forth, so many hands trying to grasp him that his garments began to rip and tear. "Don't—fer love o'—let go!" an increasing howl of misery.

"We're all friends, marshal, but we've got to have a speech!"

"Git up on the bar'l an' 'splain how come ye so, Jonah!"

"Tell us all 'bout the Blue Chameleon!"

"Don't—don't pull 'em off! I hain't got nothin' else—the p'izen critter stole my britches!"

Almost in a shriek rose his voice, and for a single breath the merrily surging crowd was silenced. Then, as he fully realized what those words meant, Billy Trigger burst into a wild yell of uncontrollable mirth.

This proved contagious, and so hearty was the laughter that men dropped to the ground, rolling over and over as they stretched their throats and thoroughly tested their lungs.

Jonah Rice sought to take advantage of this opportunity, and he had almost worked his way to one edge of the gathering before his object was divined and frustrated. He was not to escape so cheaply, and though he protested vehemently, making all sorts of promises, swearing that all he wanted was to run home and procure a decent garb, when he would return at once to gratify their curiosity, all was in vain.

Believing that a bird in the hand was worth any quantity on the wing, and feeling that the "circus" would be incomplete without a full confession, in "full feather," the men who could get near enough, lifted the marshal bodily and planted him on the up-ended barrel. Then, forming in close ranks about the unwilling orator, they cheered loudly before calling for a speech.

By this time the marshal had gathered his scattered wits a bit, and though his gaunt cheeks flamed like fire as he stood thus fully exposed to the view of all the crowd, now numbering more than half of his fellow-citizens, among whose ranks, at the edges, he now sighted more than one dress—and that caused his eyes to droop, running over his own outrageous costume!

It was entirely too much for human nature to endure, and with a wild yell of mingled rage and shame, he gave a mighty leap, shooting over the heads of the men nearest him, his long legs doubled up, his body like a deformed ball as it shot through the air.

He struck near the edge of the crowd, knocking down several men, falling himself, but recovering with cat-like activity. And catching up his skirts, he ran like a frightened deer in the direction of his own house.

Taken by surprise, for they had expected anything rather than such a desperate break on the part of their unwilling clown, the crowd permitted Jonah to get the start of them. Only a yard or two, but that was enough for his long and active legs, urged on as he was by shame and humiliation.

The chase was instant and hot, but men cannot laugh loudly and run well at the same time, and Jonah Rice reached his house door a full score yards in advance of his closest pursuer.

Fortunately for him, the door was open, and still more luckily he possessed a wife who was fully capable of playing a part for him, as well as for herself.

"Hold 'em—let me git dressed!" panted Rice, darting into the house.

Fully as swiftly did Mrs. Rice move and act. She snatched up a double-barreled shotgun, and almost filling the doorway with her buxom figure, she cried out sternly;

"Don't ye try to scrouge, gents! When I want comp'ny, I'll send a written invite. Keep back! She's loaded to the muzzle!"

The crowd knew Mrs. Rice, and they knew she was just as prompt to act as she was to threaten. And with that grim muzzle slowly sweeping from side to side; with those greenish-blue eyes flashing over the brown barrels, even the boldest recoiled rather than advanced.

"Don't shoot, Mrs. Rice," cried one of their number, no longer laughing. "It's only a joke. We just wanted Jonah to tell us how—"

"That's all right, Ran Tucker!" called out Jonah himself from cover of his sturdy wife. "I ain't holdin' no grudge, as I know, but I jest couldn't stan' up thar in—with all them wimmen watchin'!"

"Will you pull out, Mr. Tucker?" crisply cut

in Mrs. Rice, covering the dashing sport with her shot-gun.

"I'll see ye later—at the Mint Drop—tell ye all 'bout it—jest as soon's I kin find my new britches!" panted Jonah.

"Good as old wheat! We'll be looking for you, Jonah. And now, gentlemen all, three cheers for the gray mare!" cried reckless Ran Tucker, swinging his hat above his head and setting the time.

Possibly Mrs. Rice failed to comprehend the allusion to her well-known supremacy beneath that roof, for she said nothing until the rousing cheers were given. And what she said then was confined to her own household.

When the door closed sharply behind her, Randolph Tucker led the crowd back, the majority being eager to hear the story of the stage robbery told in greater detail; but even this could not make them forget the pledge given them by Jonah Rice.

A few doubted whether the marshal would have the courage to face his fellow-citizens after appearing in such a ridiculous role, but Randolph Tucker reasoned differently.

"He's just ass enough to believe that he can tell a story to turn himself into a hero. And yet he's wise enough to know that he can't hold his office, or even live in Solid City, without giving us a full explanation. And though Jonah might prefer to run for it, his mis-master wouldn't hear to his pulling up stakes. So—Jonah'll be there, and if the Mint Drop boys don't just swim in fun this night, I'm no true prophet!"

Billy Trigger felt a little sore to find his "hold-up" treated so lightly, and he laid up another grudge against Jonah Rice on that account. Only for his preposterous lies and abominable masquerade, the entire town would have been at Billy's least beck and nod that night.

With a secret vow to "even-up" before the crack of dawn, the belligerent knight of the ribbons only paused long enough to swallow his supper before putting on his "holiday attire," and wending his way to the saloon known in Solid City as "The Mint Drop."

This, as is generally the case in the younger mining towns with the most prominent resort, was a saloon, with a gambling attachment, a board partition and curtained archway separating the one from the other, so that those drinking at the bar might not interfere too greatly with the gentlemen risking their ducats on the cards.

On this evening the bar was patronized far more liberally than were the gambling layouts, for all were expecting Jonah Rice to keep his promise to call and explain his adventure with the mysterious being whom he declared to be Captain Chameleon.

Randolph Tucker had just proposed a toast, hoping their friend might not linger long, when Jonah Rice himself strode into the room, crying out gruffly in his peculiar tones:

"Hyar I be—on the war-path bigger'n a wolf!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE GENTLEMAN IN BLACK.

A MORE favorable location for springing such a surprise on one's victims, could hardly have been picked out along that winding trail, and Grip-sack Sid realized as much the very instant he caught sight of that dark, indistinctly visible shape, and caught the first note of that grim, business-like challenge.

Morris and himself were out in the moonlight, with no cover nearer than two yards, save just where that dark figure stood in dense shade, only his hands and pistols thrust into the light.

All around them were scattered rocks, mingling with scrubby bushes, and now and then a stunted tree. A single determined leap would carry either or both into this cover, but even the boldest, most desperate of men might well have hesitated before taking such long chances.

For one of those pistols covered Harper, and the other bore full upon Morris. A single touch of the finger would surely end in death.

"Steady, both o' ye!" quickly added the owner of those armed hands. "I've got the drop, and my lads are all around ye! Make a crooked move and down ye go riddled fit for a sifter!"

Grip-sack Sid, one of whose arms was around the body of Morris, lending him the needed support, felt a thrill running through that little figure, and knew by instinct that Evan was preparing for a desperate effort. And knowing that such could only fail at the best, he swiftly tightened his grip crying out:

"Don't shoot! we surrender!"

Then, in a low, hissing whisper, which he hoped Morris alone would catch and comprehend, he added:

"Trust me—fool 'em yet!"

"Hands up, then!" still more sharply commanded the robber, at the same time drawing back into the dense shade, which swallowed him up as though such a being had never put in an appearance.

"Hands up, and empty!" came a hoarse voice from almost directly behind the friends, as though to convince them the first speaker had spoken no more than the simple truth in declaring that his men had them surrounded.

"Up they be!" promptly responded Grip-sack Sid, though his actions hardly agreed with his words, since both of his hands were far differently occupied just then. "Don't shoot—he's only crazy!"

For Evan Morris, fairly beside himself at this new peril menacing his sacred charge, and rendered desperate by the strange submission of the brother he had so rashly trusted, was making a vigorous attempt to tear that valuable packet from Grip-sack Sid's bosom, after which he meant to run the gantlet or die in the struggle.

"Simmer, brother!" Harper muttered while resisting his friend as best he could without making any movements which could call for a shot from the enemy. "Safe—by my oath!"

Evan Morris ceased his mad fight, but it was through faintness, not because he heard or comprehended those guarded words. His brain whirled dizzily, and only for those strong arms, he would have sunk in a limp and nerveless heap to the ground.

"Don't hold it hard against the poor fellow, gents," panted Grip-sack Sid, keeping his position, not daring to make any further unauthorized movement. "He's got a rap on the cabeza that's just knocked him crazy for a bit."

"Hold 'em covered, lads!"

"Ay, ay, cap'n!" came a hoarse, gruff voice in answer.

"Blow them to kingdom come if you see any signs of kicking!"

"Bet we will, cap'n!"

"And you—Lizard?"

"Ready and waiting, captain!" came from another quarter, in the soft, peculiar tones instantly recognized by Grip-sack Sid.

"Clip their spurs and pinion their wings, please."

"With all the pleasure in life, captain," laughed Lieutenant Lizard, promptly stepping from cover into the moonlight where Grip-sack Sid stood with, literally, his hands full.

Although his back was partly turned toward that point, Harper had instinctively turned his head toward the direction from whence proceeded that peculiar voice, and he had no difficulty in recognizing the figure as it stepped forth. Beyond a doubt this was the woman in masculine garments, whose real sex he had so adroitly discovered a few hours earlier, near the stage road.

"It's mighty poor picking—" he began, only to have the sentence cut short by a pistol-muzzle coming in contact with his lips.

"Button up!" crisply said Lizard. "It's change, not chin we're wanting, old fellow!"

"Don't—fight for—" gasped Morris, with an effort to free himself and make a last defense of his charge.

"Fighting's played, and so are we," grimly growled Grip-sack Sid, with the air of one who resigned all hope. "Will you take charge of this poor fellow, lieutenant, or must I let him tumble in a heap?"

"Tie Morris first, Lizard," spoke up Captain Chameleon from his covert. "I'll hold the bumper level until you can attend to him."

"Drummer, if you please, sir," stiffly bowed Harper, lifting his empty hands above his head and standing at ease. "OUR HOUSE don't employ any such—"

"Hold your hush, or I'll fix you for searching dead, in place of living!" harshly growled Captain Chameleon, rising from where he had crouched at the first signs of a struggle on Evan's part.

He stepped out into the moonlight, his heavy revolver bearing full upon the brain of the commercial traveler, who gazed at him with an air of undisguised surprise. For, though garbed precisely as he had been when he went down before that backward shot from mule-back, so far as the cut of his suit was concerned, Captain Chameleon was now robed in black from crown to sole.

Evan Morris was too weak and feeble to offer any resistance to Lieutenant Lizard, and those nimble fingers swiftly applied stout bonds to both wrists and ankles, leaving the young man lying helplessly on the ground, while he—to use the pronoun befitting the garb—came forward to serve Grip-sack Sid after the same fashion.

Harper evidently felt that any attempt at giving trouble or showing obstinacy would be the rankest of folly under the existing circumstances, for with a slow, sweeping movement that plainly showed he was making no effort to draw a weapon, he swung both hands behind his back, meekly awaiting his bonds.

These were quickly applied, and then, as Lieutenant Lizard tapped his ankles with the tip of a boot, Harper sat down on the ground, never making a protest while being securely hampered.

Until this was completed Captain Chameleon stood on guard with his revolvers, but now he replaced them in his belt and eagerly bent over Morris, searching him swiftly, impatiently, yet very thoroughly.

"Better luck in this quarter, captain!" sug-

gested Lizard, as his chief drew back with a vicious oath of disappointment.

"If I only knew what you wanted to find, maybe—"

"Button up, ye fool!" growled the outlaw, striking those lips an ugly blow with his black-gloved hand.

Grip-sack Sid said nothing, but a wicked glow leaped into his eyes, and he repeated the oath he had taken more than once before—if it took all the remainder of his life he would "even up" with this knave!

Captain Chameleon searched his body from crown to sole, not once, but over and over again. He refused to believe what had long since become patent to his lieutenant—that the dearly coveted packet of money was on neither of the two men.

He turned to search Evan Morris once more, handling that young man after anything but a humane fashion. But instead of harming the prisoner, his rough treatment seemed to revive his scattered senses. And seeing this, Grip-sack Sid, fearing some rash ejaculation on Evan's part, took a little greater risk on himself for the sake of giving his wounded friend a warning hint.

"If you're hoping to find that \$20,000, Captain Chameleon, neither of us poor devils know anything about it, for—"

"You lie, curse you!" snarled the outlaw, jerking out a pistol and cocking it with a vicious click. "Where is it? Own up, or I'll blow you through!"

Once more Lieutenant Lizard interfered, pushing that weapon aside and hastily muttering something, not loud enough for even Harper's keen ears to catch accurately.

Grip-sack Sid was more than ever confident that the lieutenant was a woman, as he saw how that savage ruffian yielded to him. Surely only a woman, and one beloved, at that, could exert such an influence.

Captain Chameleon almost instantly calmed down, then stood before Grip-sack Sid, speaking loudly, sternly:

"What have you done with that package of money? Where have you hidden it? Confess, or I'll kill you like I might a mad wolf!"

"If you mean the \$20,000 you asked me for back on the stage road, captain, I never set my two eyes upon it," steadily declared Harper, meeting that fiery gaze unflinchingly.

"Where did Evan Morris hide it, then?"

"I don't reckon he ever had such a sum, for—"

"Fool!" with savage emphasis as he shook his pistol. "You are playing with death! Confess, or I'll blow your brains out!"

"You'll grant me time enough to make my will, Captain Chameleon?"

It was a superb exhibition of nerve, and was not without its good effect. His tones were smooth and even, his face even smiling as he sat under the bright light of the full moon, gazing frankly into that sable-masked face above him.

Captain Chameleon turned abruptly away to where Evan Morris was lying, stirring him roughly with a foot until, slowly, feebly, the young man struggled to a sitting posture, huskily muttering:

"What do you want? Haven't you harmed me enough, without—"

"I want that twenty thousand dollars you were trying to smuggle into Solid City, Evan Morris. Want, and mean to have it, too! Where have you stowed it?"

"I never had any such sum," declared Morris, catching at the clew furnished by Grip-sack Sid. "I was going after it, I'll admit, but you knocked that scheme in the head—and me with it!" giving his bandaged head a nod that pointed his meaning.

"He is lying, captain!" harshly cried Lieutenant Lizard. "Ask what that Indian rig means!"

"That I tried to steal out of Solid City, hoping to bring back the money to make the final payment on the Singed Cat Mine," quickly answered Morris, his wits growing clearer and stronger as he began to win back new hope. "Tried, only to fail miserably, as you ought to know, Captain Chameleon!"

"I ought to know what? What fool lie are you hatching up now? What do you mean, any way, Evan Morris?"

"You ought to know," repeated the young man, with a quick catching of his breath, like one suffering sorely. "For you waylaid and shot me like a mad wolf!"

"I? Waylaid and shot you? When and where?" almost breathlessly cried the outlaw, stooping to glare keenly into that pale face.

Morris shrunk a little from that cruel grip on his injured shoulder, but his eyes squarely met that glowing gaze as he answered:

"If not you, then your double, Captain Chameleon, though you wore a yellow suit patterned after the one you now have on. You jumped out on me up the river, nearly four miles from here, an hour by sun, this very afternoon. I tried to dodge you, but you shot me through the left shoulder. I jumped into the river, and as I came up you hit me on the head with another bullet. Then I knew nothing more until this stranger found me, nearly dead,

on a little bar half a mile or so above the ford back yonder."

Captain Chameleon acted like one fairly dazed as he listened. His grip slackened, then dropped away. He fell back a pace, still staring into that pale face. And when Evan ceased speaking a heavy breath escaped his lungs, and he turned like one completely bewildered toward Lieutenant Lizard, whose gloved hand swiftly dropped on his arm, whose masked lips swiftly pronounced:

"Steady, captain!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A PEACEFUL FIRESIDE.

LIKE one fearful of some dangerous disclosure, Lieutenant Lizard half-led, half-pushed his superior further away from where their two prisoners sat, though taking care not to entirely lose sight of them.

He seemed to be talking rapidly, with great earnestness, while Captain Chameleon seemed like one completely dazed for the moment.

Grip-sack Sid, with every sense on the keen alert, tried his level best to catch the purport of that talk, but he could only make out a low, meaningless murmur.

Man or woman, Lieutenant Lizard was too thoroughly on guard to make a false move, or throw away a single chance.

Captain Chameleon was less cautious, and from his vicious curses, Grip-sack Sid picked up enough to fully convince him that there were at least two entirely different parties trying to secure that sum of money; that the yellow chameleon was neither the red nor the black, nor any friend of his.

It was just possible that there might be a valuable clew in this fact, and Grip-sack Sid stowed it away in his brain for future consideration, always provided that the outlaw, in his vicious rage at being thus doubly foiled, did not wreak that anger on their heads.

"Cussing breaks no bones, and I hardly reckon he'll bloody-butcher us, this trip!" grimly reflected the commercial traveler.

Whatever the arguments made use of, Lieutenant Lizard soon succeeded in calming his superior in rank, to a certain extent, though it was in anything but an amicable mood that Captain Chameleon returned to where his prisoners were awaiting the end.

"How long have you been acquainted with this fellow, Morris?" he harshly demanded, giving Grip-sack Sid a brutal kick, to point his words.

"I never met him before this night."

"I believe you are lying, and I'll—"

Lieutenant Lizard gave a warning cough, and the captain softened his voice a bit, leaving that threat incomplete.

"Look ye, both!" flashing his glance from face to face. "If you have really cheated me about this money, I'll soon learn the facts. If it is as I more than suspect, this night's work will be your last. For, sure as the moon is shining up yonder, I'll hunt ye down! I'll find you though you seek to hide in the very center of the earth! And when found, I'll flay you alive and tan your pelts to make me gloves!"

Uttered in those tones, with that fiercely menacing gesture, that wild threat did not sound bombastic or impossible, however it may look in cold type. Every word was meant, and even Grip-sack Sid felt a cold chill creep over him as he looked and listened.

Captain Chameleon drew back, standing in silence while Lieutenant Lizard hastily collected the different articles which had been removed from the persons of the two prisoners, together with the valise which Grip-sack Sid wore so constantly that it seemed almost part of his being.

And then, without another word from either, the two outlaws turned and plunged into the cover, vanishing from sight in the shadows.

"That's the way to town, and—" began Morris, stopping short as Grip-sack Sid gave a warning hint.

They sat without motion, listening until the last faint echo died away. And then, as they had begun to suspect, they felt certain that only those two reckless villains had been engaged in the robbery.

There was no other sound, such as must have come to their ears if any other men were stealing away, no matter how guarded their movements might be. Yet with a caution taught by an eventful life, Harper would run no unnecessary risks.

"Not a word," he whispered, barely loud enough for his companion to catch in that otherwise perfect silence. "We may be watched."

It was a trying ordeal, particularly to Evan, whose wounded shoulder pained him severely, owing to the manner in which his arm had been drawn backward to receive the thongs about his wrists. But he bore it manfully, making no sound or movement until Grip-sack Sid was satisfied that they were indeed alone.

"I didn't know but what those gentlemen had left a pal or two to watch us, hoping to learn something about the money they were after, you know," at length Harper said, with a short,

dry laugh. "Time and labor spent in vain, of course, since we told all we knew without disguise. Lucky you didn't get held up coming back, instead of starting out, partner! I verily believe the gentleman in black would have been so delighted at making such an elegant haul that he would have blown our roofs off—I just do!"

"It may be so," with a sigh that was not counterfeited, thanks to his wound. "And yet, disguised as an Indian buck, I thought I could leave town unsuspected, and make the round trip."

"Well, you're not the first man who's found out what a mighty uncertain quantity a dead sure thing can be! And now—wonder if there is any law against our trying to unhitch our own hands?"

Morris made no reply to this, for he knew that it was directed toward any road-agent who might, after all, be lurking near, keeping an eye on their movements and an ear open for their words.

After waiting a full minute without hearing aught to the contrary, Grip-sack Sid spoke again:

"Reckon we'll have to run the chances, pardner, unless we want to make a night of it, out under the moon. So—just slew around a bit, and I'll see what I can do at craw-fishing!"

Catching the right idea, Morris obeyed, and awkwardly hitching himself along by anything but easy or comfortable contortions of his supple body, Grip-sack Sid soon contrived to place himself back to back with his wounded comrade, then set his fingers to work at the knots which held Evan's thongs in place.

It was anything but a brief or easy job, but Harper always went in to win, and stubbornly sticking to business, he at length managed to set the young man at liberty. After that, the rest was far easier, and though the outlaws had stripped them of all but their clothes, taking even the penknife with which Grip-sack Sid had liberated himself from the dead mule, a few minutes longer sufficed to complete their work.

"Wait, and rest," muttered Harper, rising up and creeping noiselessly into the bushes, making his way entirely around the open spot in which they had been captured so neatly, only returning when fully assured that they were not watched by any near enemy.

When he reported this welcome fact, Evan Morris started to ask the question which had been troubling him for so long; what had become of the money packet, and how had he managed to cheat such keen eyes and such thorough search?

"Wait; let's crawl into hiding a ways from this spot, so that if our noble friends should take a notion to come back for another search, they'll have a job to pick us up."

Not until they had left that moonlighted spot a number of rods behind them, did Grip-sack Sid consent to a halt. Then, crouching down in close company under shelter of a huge rock, under which a rude sort of cave had been dug or shaped by some unknown means, where they could be approached only from directly in front, Evan at length was able to put his question unchecked.

"Knocked you all in a heap, didn't it?" chuckled Grip-sack Sid, plainly enjoying the puzzle far more than his comrade could, as yet. "I hadn't time to warn you, they jumped us so mighty sudden, and I was afraid you'd spoil it all by trying too hard to break away."

"It was only a lack of strength that kept me from doing it!"

"I know; and that's a few dollars off the debt the yellow Chameleon owes you, brother! Just bear it in mind when you call on him for a settlement, will you?"

"But the—where is it?"

"In hiding. In heap sight safer keeping than it would have been if either you or I had froze fast to it. I hinted as much, over the river, but you wouldn't listen to such a thing. And now—"

"Where is it, I ask you? Do you want to drive me crazy, man?" almost savagely muttered Morris, gripping Harper by an arm with feverish strength.

"You remember how you took faint just after we left the cabin, on the other side of the ford?"

"The Jameson cabin—yes!"

"You know I backed you up against that big tree, to rest a bit? Well, I just happened to touch my hand to a big knot, and my fingers stuck into a hole through the bark. And so—I rammed the package into that knot, and left it there, giving a spit over my shoulder for good luck. And—didn't it come hot and heavy?" breaking off with a low chuckle of pure delight.

Evan gave a hurried exclamation, and started to leave the hole. Harper caught him, asking what he wanted.

"That package, of course! The tree stands right by the path, and anybody passing by would be sure to discover it by daylight!"

"Not unless they shinned up high enough to look inside the hole. I took care of that. And—if you'll heed my sober advice, pardner, there it will stay until we can come back from Solid City to-morrow, in broad daylight, with men

enough and tools enough to bid defiance to all the two-legged chameleons and lizards these mountains can supply."

"No," doggedly answered Morris, though he no longer struggled to get away from that masterful hand. "If I get to town this night, the money must get there too!"

"So you said once before, and I listened to your will, pardner. I acted according to my best judgment, after making a few notes at the Jameson cabin, and you see what came of it. Now—let the money wait where it is, for who knows? Captain Chameleon—the yellow chameleon, for instance!—may try another hold-up before we get to town."

"I don't think it—and I'll never see Solid City again without that money!" almost fiercely declared the wounded man.

He was growing feverish again, and was likely to grow worse before he improved. Only for this belief Grip-sack Sid might not have treated him with so much lenience, for surely he had already incurred trouble and peril enough on his account.

"All right," he said soothingly, yielding the point, though greatly against his better judgment. "I'll go get the packet if you'll promise me to remain quietly here until I can go and come."

"You will come back? And bring the packet with you?" slowly asked Evan, leaning forward to gaze intently into that strong face.

"I'll do both, unless I'm held up or killed," was the grave reply. "It's just possible that our gentle friends may have suspected something of the truth, and be on the watch. Then, if they catch me going away from instead of toward Solid City—well, you can guess the rest about as well as I can tell you, pardner."

"I'll go with you, then—"

"You'll stay right where you are, or I'll put back the bonds I relieved you of a bit ago," was the stern retort. "Yes, I mean it, every word! You're not fit for scouting, and I'll have to go up above the ford to swim the river. If I have to do the job I'll do it after my own planning, or it won't be done at all!"

Perhaps it was fortunate for both that, just then, an attack of the old trouble with his head recurred. Dizzy, weak, unnerved, Morris gave way, and making him swear not to move a pace from that spot, Grip-sack Sid left him, making his way as rapidly as was consistent with due prudence, to the river, some little distance above the ford.

Confident that he had not been followed or observed, as yet, he slipped into the water, with a wry grimace at its coolness, swimming silently across, then picking his way toward the Jameson cabin.

Just as once before he caught sight of that light in the window, and as he paused to look at it, he heard the low, melancholy wailing of a violin, plainly coming from the cabin itself.

Then, with his old suspicions awakened, Grip-sack Sid silently crept along to the vine-clad wall, stealthily peering in through the window.

To catch his breath with a curious sensation. For, despite the ugly suspicions he had entertained, never before had he gazed upon a more innocent, peaceful fireside than he did in that moment.

CHAPTER XVII.

FUN FOR THE MINT DROP BOYS.

"TALK of the devil, and you'll—hear an angel crow!" chanted reckless Ran Tucker, emptying his glass and wheeling toward the door at that gruff supplement to his toast.

As an ordinary thing, this pointed remark would have been greeted by laughter and cheers, for Randolph Tucker was a great favorite among "the boys," and one of those magnetic leaders who never lack for a following; while, on the other hand, since he had been elevated to the responsible position he now held, Jonah Rice had won far more dislike than he had friendship or good will.

This was partly due to his naturally crabbed disposition, which had been carefully disguised while its owner was hunting office. When once firmly installed, the thin veneer was dropped, and like one greatly inflated with pride, Jonah stalked through his official life with nose high in air, his head leagues above all common people.

In a happy moment, Randolph Tucker, a gay, fun-loving, reckless young man of sporting proclivities, and a general favorite in Solid City, had dubbed Jonah "The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance," and though many of those who eagerly adopted that idea in all probability never heard of Cervantes or his immortal hero, it was caught up and echoed back from all sides, until Jonah seriously thought of making it a personal affair.

In good truth, his usual appearance strongly resembled that which we have been led to attribute to Don Quixote: tall, gaunt, angular in form and build, with an enormous hooked nose, lantern jaws and face clean shorn save for the pair of long mustaches. These, added to his official expression, so solemn as to seem melancholy, with a look of owlsh gravity in his yellowish, protuberant eyes, and his slow, measured strides as he passed up or down the streets over which he held police control, gave point to

the title which all could appreciate save he in whose honor it was given.

But this night saw a radical change in Jonah Rice, and familiar with his form and face as all inside the Mint Drop were, it required a second glance to fully recognize the being who came through the door with a warlike leap and savage swagger such as would not have disgraced the veriest "chief" of them all.

Jonah had been drinking, that was evident to all, and though he was too shrewd to break his pledge given the yelling crowd led by Ran Tucker, he clearly hoped to escape at least a share of their ridicule by brag and bluster. And the better to carry out this new character, he had stopped more than once by the way for the purpose of "bracing up," after the regulation fashion.

Ran Tucker was shrewd enough to divine the truth, and as his main object was to extract as much sport out of the affair as possible, he played his cards toward that end, beginning by trying to set the marshal at ease with himself and his present companions.

This was not such a difficult matter to one with keen wit, ready tongue, and well-lined pockets. And when they caught his drift a greater portion of the company quickly followed his lead.

Still, Jonah Rice had to catch it from all sides, for a time, and though the various quips and jests may not be worthy a full record, they produced any amount of mirth and laughter. Even Jonah laughed; but so lugubriously that he more than ever resembled the melancholy Knight of La Mancha.

Ran Tucker kept up his work until Jonah Rice had completely forgotten the role which he had entered the Mint Drop firmly resolved to maintain to the end of that dreaded ordeal, at the same time coaxing the marshal to imbibe glass after glass of whisky. Then, when he felt that Jonah was in fit condition for speaking the unvarnished truth, he began the cry for a full recital of the "holding up" by Captain Chameleon.

"It's a darn lie ef he says it!" growled Billy Trigger, looking on in gloomy disgust.

"Of course it is," confidentially whispered Tucker in his ear. "Let him tangle his legs up in his tongue, then we'll laugh him out of town and his office at one and the same time. See?"

There was nothing to hinder this confidential whisper, for with the cue once given them, other tongues caught up the cry, and though the half-drunken officer looked as though he would greatly prefer a sound thrashing, he dared not attempt to again escape through flight.

"Lie down and form steps so our noble leader can ascend to his throne—look out for your glassware, Martin!" laughed Ran Tucker, springing to the polished counter active as a panther. "And I'll do my level best to introduce both orator and subject, if you'll permit!"

"Good enough! Hyste him up! Stiddy—so!" laughingly chorused a dozen voices, as strong hands closed upon the reluctant marshal and tossed him up beside Tucker.

There was a confused medley of laughter, cheers, cat-calls and demands for a speech, with the names of both men equally prominent; but when Ran Tucker lifted a hand in silent command, the tumult quickly subsided.

"Gentlemen, friends, fellow-citizens!" began Tucker, his clear, musical notes ringing forth distinctly, his handsome face grave enough, though his bright blue eyes were dancing mischievously. "Allow me to introduce to your notice and consideration the noblest Roman of them all—even to his cut-water! The Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance—whose device is a gray mare, rampant; decidedly so!"

"Durn the palaver," growled Jonah, sulkily. "Let's git it over."

"Silence, all! Our noble hero is eager to tell you how he went, he saw, he—returned in a brand new uniform, of the latest design and most fashionable cut! Captured, mind you, gentlemen, on the bloody field of Mars, though you might fancy Venus had more to do with it, from simply viewing the glorious trophies at a respectful distance. But right there is where you'd get fooled—bad!"

"You all know what mischief Captain Chameleon has been creating in this vicinity of late. And you know, too, how often valiant Jonah has declared that all he prayed for was just to meet up with the audacious knave; just to come within arm's-length of the rascal; when he'd either lay down his life in the attempt, or return a conquering hero, bringing with him horns and hoofs, hide and tallow, head and tail of the dastardly outlaw who has kicked up such a precious bobby!"

"And when he learned of this mighty vow, carried to his ears by the birds of the air, no doubt! When he learned that our noble leader had put on his paint and dug up the hatchet in deadly earnest, the heart of Captain Chameleon run down into his boots, and the better to effect his escape from annihilation, he changed his outward semblance to that of a woman! And right there you have the kernel! Right there you see how and why and what for Jonah

came to town in all his glory—and a nightcap, gown and petticoat!"

Amid hearty cheers and laughter, Ran Tucker leaped to the floor, leaving the half-drunken marshal to sheepishly face the crowd, knowing that he could not escape without making full and ample confession.

Even to one of his thick skin and coarse, brutish nature, this was a bitter pill to swallow. For there was much more truth than fiction in Ran Tucker's introduction.

Jonah Rice had loudly sneered at those who had meekly yielded to the might of Captain Chameleon, and loudly declared that if ever he met or was met by the outlaw, justice would get in its full dues, or Solid City should lose a marshal by death.

And only a short time before this, when he set out on the little journey from which he had returned that night, in such humiliating fashion, he had pompously hoped that Captain Chameleon might be so foolish as to try to hold him up!

All this flashed through his brain with painful distinctness, and realizing how publicly Ran Tucker had held him up to ridicule, while ostensibly praising him, he gave a howl of rage, shaking a clinched fist at the handsome sport below, snarling:

"You've made a durn fool out o' me, Ran Tucker, an'—"

"Don't malign nature, or deny her her rights, Jonah!"

"An' I kin lick the daylights—"

"Does that mean a challenge to fight a duel, Mr. Rice?" sharply interjected Tucker, instantly growing cold and grave.

"Ef you ain't too mighty skeered to meet a man—yes!"

"All right, Jonah! But are you a man? I used to think so, but after what I saw to-night, how can I help doubting? So—bring me a certificate of birth, from your family doctor, or make a regular affidavit before a justice of the peace that you *really* are a man; then I'll fight you with any weapon—except a broom or rolling-pin! If not—well, I really couldn't run the risk of spoiling my record by shooting or even punching—an old woman!"

"Stop the row! No fighting! Tell us about the blue chameleon! The story first! Talk, or take another ride—on a rail!"

Such a storm of shouts arose, that Jonah Rice could no longer resist the pressure. Despite the liquor he had swilled, his nerves failed him, and he yielded to those loud imperious demands.

Silence followed his submission, made known by signs, and then he made all haste to begin his narrative, eager to get an ugly job over.

He explained how he had started for Black Water, on a bit of business which he had had in mind for a week or more past, but which he had put off from day to day.

He completed his errand, and was on his way back to Solid City, when, about an hour before sunset, and some ten or more miles from town, he was taken completely by surprise and held up by Captain Chameleon and a full half-score armed ruffians.

And then, amid imperfectly suppressed laughter, he told how shamefully he was treated; how he was robbed of his weapons, his official badge, even his trowsers.

He described his chief tormentor, Captain Chameleon, who was dressed in a close-fitting suit such as had so frequently been described by those whom the road-agent had robbed, save that its color was dark blue from crown to sole. And then, in lower, abashed tones, he told how his brutal enemies had robbed him in fantastic guise, binding him to his saddle, sending him away at break-neck speed, thanks to the bunch of thorns which one of the villains clapped under his horse's tail.

"All the same, it's a durn lie ef you say that blue critter was the ginocine Cap'n Chameleon!" stubbornly chipped in Billy Trigger, ready and even eager for war to the knife. "Fer jest that very time Cap'n Chameleon—the *raal* article, mind yet—was holdin' up me an' my hearse on jest the other side o' Solid City!"

"You're a liar, an' I kin—"

Before that fierce challenge could be completed or accepted, the sound of a struggle at the front door drew all eyes in that direction, and after one hasty glance, the crowd surged back and to each side, one body of them fairly running over Billy Trigger as he started to draw a revolver with which to answer Jonah Rice.

For, with a sudden yielding to an unseen force, a braying burro plunged into the bar-room, stopping short when the center of the cleared space was gained, thrusting out its gray muzzle and fairly causing the frail walls to shiver with that extraordinary volume of voice.

"Jonah Rice, Marshal of Solid City, gentlemen!" came a shrill, peculiar voice from the gloom outside the saloon. "Come to explain why he *didn't* capture Captain Chameleon!"

The startled assembly had even so soon begun to realize the nature of the jest, but this shrill introduction completed that recognition, and the voice of the shaggy burro was fairly drowned by the yells of laughter which greeted the spectacle.

For it was a truly ridiculous scene.

The burro had a pair of trowsers drawn over its front legs, the seat coming over its chest, and that seat ornamented with a huge star, cut out of bright tin, as a burlesque badge of office. A felt hat, with holes slit for the long ears to pass through, was tied upon its crown. A belt of arms was tied around its middle, the holsters containing pistols bearing the marshal's initials. For they, the trowsers and hat, all were recognized by many present as belonging to Jonah Rice, and which he had just charged Captain Chameleon with stealing.

Truly, the Mint Drop boys were having their fill of fun.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORE PLUCK THAN PRUDENCE.

IN those first few moments, Grip-sack Sid felt ashamed of himself as he peered through the lighted window on that peaceful scene.

As before, Norah Jameson was sitting in front of the fireplace, but now she was quietly busied over some light sewing for herself, a faint smile playing about her red lips, the picture of calm happiness.

Partly hidden by her comely figure, was that of a man, in whose hands a violin was emitting soft, wailing strains, full of the melancholy yet exquisite music which no other instrument can produce to such perfection.

Grip-sack Sid crouched low, passing under the window, coming up to renew his gaze at the opposite corner, through which he could obtain a clearer view of the second figure.

The man was leaning back against the wall, his feet tucked up on a round of his tilted chair, one cheek lovingly resting on the violin whose strings his left hand was caressing. His eyes were partly or entirely closed, like one completely lost to all else save the soft music his skill was invoking.

Doubled up though his figure was, Grip-sack Sid could fairly estimate his height, which appeared to be a little above the average. His age, judging from his iron-gray hair and long, almost white beard, must have been more than half a century; possibly another decade.

His profile was fairly regular, and in a younger man would have been deemed really handsome. His nose, long and straight, with flexible nostrils, was really the only feature which was open to full inspection, thanks to his position and the full beard which covered his cheeks and joined his iron-gray locks.

The table had been cleared, and pushed back against the wall. A door, leading into another room, was ajar just enough to give the eaves-dropper a glimpse of a low bed, with snow-white sheet folded back over the gay patch-work coverlet.

It would have been no easy task to point out a quieter, more peaceful fireside than this in that vast territory; yet, instead of his suspicions weakening, they grew stronger!

"Michael Jameson—the fellow she called father, so sweetly!" inwardly decided Grip-sack Sid, as he drew back until there was less risk of discovery through a glance toward the uncurtained window. "But how did he get here, without our hearing or seeing him? If he was at Solid City, as she claimed, how could he have passed us by without a sound? And when? Before or after that devil in sables left us?"

Softly, silently as a velvet-footed panther, Grip-sack Sid crept back to the window, his keen eyes passing slowly over the trim, plump, well-developed form of Norah Jameson.

She seemed taller than that mental photograph with which he was comparing her, but past experience told him that this was to be expected, since a woman in masculine garb seems to lose something of her usual height. Yet—was, or was it not?"

He knew that the Lieutenant Lizard who had played such a prominent part in his capture and searching, that afternoon, had been a woman in disguise: knew it, as surely as Ida Fenwick did, a little later.

Then, finding a young woman—with just such another plump form, and seemingly just such bright, dark, lustrous eyes—living so near the point where he had met with his adventure, Grip-sack Sid had been seized with a startling suspicion that under this humble roof lurked the mystery which had so long baffled the honest men of that region.

For that reason he had been so willing to listen to Evan Morris when the injured young man urged their departure. And now, recalling Norah's statement that her father was absent at Solid City: knowing that his shortest and customary route lay along the very trail where Captain Chameleon had arrested them: knowing that, even if Jameson had passed by since they stole out of the trail for consultation, he could hardly have done so without being heard: taking all this into consideration, Grip-sack Sid more than ever felt that the cabin and its inmates would repay investigation.

"See you later, good people!" he inwardly muttered, turning from the window and cautiously proceeding toward the deformed tree, in whose knotted trunk he had so luckily concealed the packet of bank-notes. "And I'm betting a

big round dollar that I'll have something better than my trouble for my pains, too!"

Though knowing that Evan Morris would be impatiently awaiting his return, Grip-sack Sid did not let that consideration prevent him from using all possible caution. All unarmed as he was, he could make but a poor fight for the treasure against fully armed foes, in case Captain Chameleon and Lieutenant Lizard should have suspected something of the truth, and were lying in ambush.

Keeping in the densest shadows, and then pressing close to the trunk itself as he rose up to feel for the knot-hole above his head, Harper used his eyes and ears to the best of his ability.

No sound came to him, however, save an occasional thrill of music from the not distant cabin. And then, his fingers closing around the cool oil-skin, he secured the packet and as cautiously beat a retreat.

He would not attempt a crossing at the ford, so clearly lit up by the rays of the moon, though he gave a little shiver of disgust as he thought of again swimming the cold stream.

"Too mighty light!" he muttered, shaking his head as he looked wistfully at the easy stepping-stones. "If they really reckon anything of the sort, that's just the point they'd watch most carefully. And if they caught me there—well, salt wouldn't begin to save me!"

True, he really suspected—half-believed, rather—the Jamesons, father and daughter as they claimed to be, were none other than the outlaws, returned home and assuming home-like airs on the chance that one or both of their recent prisoners might think of investigating matters in that quarter; but suspecting was not knowing, and it was one of his mottoes to take nothing for granted.

So, reluctantly enough, though he made all the speed compatible with prudence, Grip-sack Sid acted just as though he knew that ford was under guard, and passing down the river to a favorable point, he slipped into the cold water and swam silently across.

Nothing happened to trouble him by the way, and drawing near to the spot where he had parted from Evan Morris, he paused to listen for a few seconds before giving the signal agreed upon between them.

He caught the faint echo of a low, husky moan, and with a fresh fear assailing him, he uttered the signal, then pressed forward without waiting for the answer.

"How goes it, pardner?" he softly breathed, touching that crouching figure and gently giving it a shake. "I'm back, and all's well with me."

"You—say you have brought—"

"Help? Of course I have," quickly cutting that question short, never once losing sight of prudence. "Feel of it if you don't believe what I say, old fellow!"

"Thank Heaven!" gasped Evan, as his fingers closed quickly over the packet, which needed no eyes to be recognized. "I'll keep my vow, after all! Haste—let's go! I must not lose more time, for—for I'm—I've got my last dose, I reckon!"

"Git out!" almost roughly ejaculated Grip-sack Sid, though that broken, feverish voice alarmed him far more than he cared to show. "Why, you're all right, and almost fit to run a foot-race or get married! Two of the hardest tests any man can undergo, to my notion!"

"I did fear I was—was dying, but now—this gives me more strength!" said Evan, his voice growing clearer, steadier. "Come, we will be late getting in, as it is."

"Wait a bit, pardner. You're picking up strength, as you say, and a few minutes spent in resting will help us to the end all the sooner. And then—I want to talk to you soberly for a minute or so. Of course we'll name no names, nor mention what other ears hadn't ought to hear, too plainly; but I'm thinking we'd better hide that article in a snug spot, to wait until we're better prepared to defend it."

"You mean to leave it behind, while we go on?"

"Precisely. Stop—let me argue a bit first. You hooted at the idea when I broached it, over the river. Well, I acted without consulting you, on my best judgment. What resulted? We were held up, but the article was safe from their evil clutches. You know how viciously determined that devil is to secure it. Well, what security have you that he'll not make still another effort to gain his ends? How do you know he'll not reason out just what has happened, and so lie in wait for us as we try to reach Solid City?"

"If I go, the money goes," slowly said Morris. "I fear I've got my last sickness. I promised to bring the money, or die trying. So—even though I knew a score such foul ruffians barred the way, I'd run the risk! I'll never step foot inside of Solid City without having that package in my possession!"

Grip-sack Sid maintained silence for some little time after that dogged, almost fierce outburst. His brows were knitted, his lips tightly compressed. If Evan Morris had been a sound man! If he had not been a member of his loved Order, and thus one whom he was oath-bound to aid and support in trouble or distress! If

either of these things had been, Sidney Harper would have washed his hands of the matter right then and there.

He knew that he was advising for the best, all things taken into consideration. Even though it seemed improbable that the road-agents would make another effort to secure the prize, by holding them up so soon after searching them in vain, it was not impossible. And the money could be safely hidden, to remain until, armed and with daylight to aid them, it could be called for in comparative safety.

But seeing that Evan Morris was in no fit condition for listening to reason, and bound by a sacred oath not to desert him, Grip-sack Sid yielded to that obstinacy, and assisted his brother by oath to leave the den.

Though the distance remaining to be covered was not so great, when estimated by miles and rods, Grip-sack Sid found his hands full in getting to the end of that night-tramp.

Evan was very weak, worn out quite as much by mental anxiety as fatigue, or through loss of blood, no doubt. At times he would push on with feverish speed, only to fall faint and almost swooning a minute later, enforcing a halt and the loss of much precious time.

He kept one hand pressed tight over his bosom, where lay the packet of bank-notes, for he had refused to surrender it to Grip-sack Sid, fancying, no doubt, that he would again hide it away despite his objections.

So often were these spells of weakness, that the Grip-sack Sharp grew seriously worried over the condition of his charge, and had he felt certain of finding the way to Solid City without a guide, he would have carried the wounded man in his arms as far as his strength held out, and if that fell short, would have pressed on to return with help.

He did propose this latter course, while waiting for Evan to gather a fresh supply of strength, but Morris begged him not to think of it.

"Because, if I die—you must take my place!"

Grip-sack Sid affected to laugh at such a wild fancy, but in his heart he was by no means so sure Evan was mistaken. The young man was growing worse as the hours crept on, and he might never reach Solid City with life in his body.

That was a night Sidney Harper would long remember, and it was with difficulty that he refrained from shouting aloud in high glee when, at last, in the slowly coming dawn, he caught sight of town, lying on the level below them, little more than half a mile away!

"Good as home, old fellow!" he laughed, picking Evan up in his arms and striding rapidly on. "And you were right; no more chameleons for us this blessed morning!"

Yet he was not nearly so certain of that as he pretended, and until they were fairly at the edge of Solid City, he did not slacken his keen watch around them. But then, worn and weary, he set Evan on his own feet, supporting him with one arm as they made their way toward the part of town pointed out by Morris as the home of his uncle.

And then, just when all seemed well, the next blow fell!

Literally, too! For, with an angry howl of hatred, a man sprung forward and struck Harper to the ground with a stunning blow!

CHAPTER XIX.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

"WHORAY! an' it's me that's doin' the shoutin'!" fairly howled the fellow who dealt that cowardly blow, wildly flourishing his clubbed revolver, and giving the first steps of a fantastic war-dance.

He had been standing in the doorway of the Mint Drop when the two men passed by, too worn the one, too ill the other, to think of peril when they seemed fairly in the midst of safety. And after one wild-eyed look, Jonah Rice jerked out a revolver, and using it as a club, leaped out behind the friends and struck with savage might, felling Grip-sack Sid to the ground much as a log might fall.

Evan Morris staggered a pace or two further, then, no longer supported by another's strength, his own failing, he sunk in a nerveless heap, his guarding hand dropping away from his sacred charge only when his senses fled.

"Pile onto the pizen critter!" howled Jonah Rice, prancing around his partially stunned victim, even then seeming afraid to actually grapple with the being whom he had so brutally assaulted, making desperate efforts to cock his revolver. "Nail him, gents! It's my meat! I said I'd git even ef—"

"Who's putting frills on you now, Jonah?" came a clear voice from back of the dozen men called forth from the Mint Drop by that outcry.

"Didn't I tell ye I'd fetch him? Didn't I—Hold him fast while I blow daylight clean out o' him!"

Ran Tucker came through the crowd with a surge and a rush, either by intention or by accident almost doubling the marshal up as he struck against him.

"What is it? Who is it? How did the row begin?"

"Cap'n Chameleon—no less!" fairly yelled Jonah, rallying, and having managed to jerk back the hammer, thrusting his pistol almost against the back of Grip-sack Sid as he struggled to arise. "I'll blow him through! I'll—Durn the gun!"

His savage blow dealt Grip-sack Sid had bent the frame so that the cylinder refused to work, or that outrage would have been topped off by murder most foul.

Ran Tucker struck his wrist sharply, knocking the disabled weapon a dozen feet away, but before he could do more that dangerous cry was caught up by the other men, nearly all of whom flung themselves upon Harper, some holding his limbs, others forced to satisfy their hatred by getting in a punch or two at longer range, while one, cooler witted than the rest, hastened into and out of the Mint Drop, with a coil of small rope, suitable for binding such an important criminal.

Ran Tucker took no part in the mad scramble, seemingly half-stunned by the words uttered by Jonah Rice, until he caught sight of Evan Morris lying just at the edge of that confused mass of legs and headless bodies.

"Holy smoke!" he ejaculated, springing forward, catching the unconscious young man under the arms and dragging him out of danger. "It's young Morris, or I'm a howling liar!"

While he was thus engaged, quick work was made by the men who had flocked to the aid of Jonah Rice at his mention of that notorious title, and now, each man disentangling his own legs from the heap, a look could be taken at the captive, his body fairly swathed in rope coils, lying helpless on the broad of his back.

Not until that instant did any one seem to question the correctness of that accusation, but now, as they had a fair chance to inspect their prisoner, some began to doubt, and one bluntly asked Rice:

"Who said he's Cap'n Chameleon? How d'ye know he is, Jonah?"

"Look at his rig-out! Blue all over! Didn't I tell ye—an' I swore I'd play even with the durn thief an' robber, an'—"

"You're a liar if you dare even hint that I'm Captain Chameleon!" sharply cried Harper, his scattered wits rallying promptly at the sound of that hated name.

He made a desperate effort to arise, until then hardly aware of his being so thoroughly hampered, so rapidly had it all taken place.

He did lift his head and shoulders, Jonah Rice falling back with a startling curse as he saw so much, and tugging at his second revolver with murder in his heart.

Harlow Crampton, always an early riser, and for many years in the habit of taking just one swallow of whisky as an appetizer, was on his way to the Mint Drop when that sudden commotion broke forth.

In spite of his frosty pow and his half-century of years, he was not old or feeble enough to forget that he had once been a sport among sports, and scenting "fun" in the gray dawn, he waddled forward at his best gait, almost stumbling over Ran Tucker as that worthy bent over the still insensible Evan Morris.

"Hello, Tuck! what's the racket with—"

"Look after Morris, Uncle Harlow," hastily interposed Tucker, turning to leap upon Jonah Rice, just in time to disarm him for the second time inside of ten minutes.

"Let me—it's Cap'n Chameleon! I've 'rested him, an'—"

"You lie!" sharply broke in Grip-sack Sid, this time gaining a sitting posture and maintaining it. "I've been fighting that red devil all night long!"

"Blue, blue all over! Look at him, will ye! Didn't I tell ye he was kivered all over in blue?" howled Rice, still seeming beside himself, what with whisky, rage and excitement all combined, pointing at the suit of clothes worn by the Grip-sack Sharp in confirmation of his words.

"Blue, of course, but that's about all you can say," scornfully chipped in Ran Tucker, who clearly had little love or respect for the city marshal. "You swore to a set of blue tights, and this is only an ordinary business suit, such as I can find a dozen of in town this day! Go soak your head, Jonah! That frilled nightcap has begun to strike in!"

For once his sharp speech seemed to lose its point, and instead of the laugh which he plainly hoped to raise, ugly murmurs ran from lip to lip. And Jonah Rice, growing calmer as he saw that his enemy was powerless to harm him, or even to strike back save with his tongue, repeated his accusation, clinching it with many a hearty oath.

And when it was clear that a majority of those present—the first dozen increased to a score, with others rapidly being added—sided with the marshal, at least so far as entertaining that dangerous charge was concerned, Ran Tucker turned away to where Harlow Crampton was dividing his time between trying to restore Evan Morris to consciousness and taking in all of that confused racket with eyes and ears, hurriedly muttering:

"Speak a word for the stranger, Uncle Har-

low, or the boys 'll be bully-ragged by Rice into hanging him for general results. I'll see to Morris, until—"

"Then you reckon he ain't the cap'n?" spluttered Crampton.

"No more than you or I am!" with a short, disgusted nod as he took charge of the wounded man. "Don't let 'em lynch: I'll get Morris home, and bring Hastings to help, with others if I can find 'em in time."

He said no more, for Crampton was not listening, no doubt preferring to shape his own judgment when he could hear and see without anything else to distract his attention.

Ran Tucker cast a frowning glance at Jonah Rice, who was doing his level best to fire the hearts of the crowd by his savage accusations and charges against the prisoner.

"It'll be a blessing to decency if I were to drop the big-mouthed rascal!" muttered Tucker, his face showing how gladly he would offer the sacrifice if only a reasonable excuse should offer.

Evan Morris gave a faint moan, stirring slightly, and recalled to his self-imposed duty, Tucker stooped and lifted the wounded man to his feet. And Evan, though he could hardly be called conscious, as yet, mechanically moved his legs and feet, walking after a fashion, just as he had done during the latter portion of that night-tramp.

That was about all that could be said, however. Randolph Tucker had to sustain his weight, and at times even carry the poor fellow along. But he was strong and willing, and stuck to his task without a murmur, though more than once he flashed an anxious glance backward as he caught an ugly sound from near the Mint Drop.

"If they lynch the poor devil!" he mused, darkly. "If they do—and Jonah can't prove his charges beyond the ghost of a doubt—I'll make an example of the long-gear'd hound!"

His anxiety to see the matter through, possibly, lent Tucker both strength and wind, for as Evan Morris failed again, before his home was fairly reached, the sport picked him up in his arms as he might a little child, breaking into a dog-trot that quickly carried him to the front door of Conrad Hastings's house, where he rapped and pounded at a vigorous rate, only ceasing when a window was thrown up, above, and the sharp voice of Hastings himself demanded what was wanted.

"Morris is here, hurt in some way, and needs help!" quickly answered Tucker, then placing Evan on the step, he turned and dashed away.

"What—who are you?" asked the startled and bewildered man in the second story; but there was no answer, and very much as though he wished to avoid thanks—or recognition, it might be—Tucker bowed his head to hide his face, then ran swiftly around the corner of the house, though that course led him almost directly away from instead of to the trouble near the Mint Drop.

But Conrad Hastings never noted this peculiar conduct, just then, for Evan Morris, roused from his half-stupor by the sound of his uncle's voice above his head, rallied strength sufficient to cry aloud:

"Uncle Con! Come—let me in!"

A moment of silence, then Hastings uttered a cry of mingled relief and pleasure, withdrawing his head and letting the sash fall with a crash that effectually roused the other inmates from their morning nap.

"What is it, father?" tremblingly asked Ida, protruding her fair head through a crack in her chamber door, just in time to catch Hastings as he started down-stairs in his night-dress. "Not—not robbers? Not that dreadful—"

"It's Evan, come home! Dress—" spluttered the excited mine-owner, risking his neck in his haste to reach the lower floor.

Recalling as he did how firmly Evan had declared that he would have the money with him if he lived to get back home, Hastings never for an instant doubted but what the gallant young fellow had faithfully kept his vow, now that he was at the door.

Roused from a sound slumber, deeper than usual because of the late hour at which he had retired the night before, thanks to the unlooked-for arrival of Ida, Mr. Hastings had failed to catch the full meaning of the words spoken by Randolph Tucker, even as he had failed to recognize either voice or owner. And so, wholly unprepared for such a sight, he staggered back with a gasping exclamation when, as he unlocked and swiftly flung the door wide, Evan Morris pitched headlong into the hall.

Bare-headed, save for the soiled rag that bound up his wound. His clothes torn and tattered, plainly showing bloody marks even by that dim light. Falling like a corpse, and lying motionless for the first few seconds. Little wonder, then, that the elder man should recoil with an awful fear assailing brain and heart.

But he quickly rallied, and even as his hands touched that prostrate figure, Morris uttered a word or two which mixed joy with those fears.

"I said—and did! Got it—safe in—"

"The money! Thank Heaven for that!" fervently ejaculated Hastings, the glad tidings, imperfect though they were, lending him double

strength of arm and back as he lifted the young man in his arms and carried him into a room opening off the hall, where he placed him on a lounge.

Rushing back to the hall he called sharply on his daughter and Mrs. Morris, feeling that their aid would be required, though he had not stopped to investigate those injuries as yet.

He returned, to find Evan sitting up, fumbling in his bosom, his face looking ghastly and seeming to fill with stupefied horror as his unsteady fingers failed to find the precious packet of notes.

"I had it—had my hand on it when—gone!" "Evan, lad!" gasped Hastings, frightened by that awful despair.

"Gone! stolen! Just when—"

With a hoarse, gurgling sound he toppled over, rolling heavily to the floor, lying like one suddenly stricken by the hand of death!

To so nearly succeed, yet to fail, proved the last feather.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BLUE CHAMELEON AGAIN.

FOR a time Jonah Rice had matters pretty much his own way after Randolph Tucker left the scene, and now that he saw Grip-sack Sid was helpless, bound far too securely to escape or to fight other than with his tongue, the marshal made no further attempts upon his life.

The capture, happening so opportunely, helped drive the fumes of drink from his brain, and while he was too thick-skulled and stubborn to admit even to himself the possibility of a mistake in the man, he did his level best to bring about a hasty lynching, feeling that when the blue chameleon was fairly hanged, then, and not until then, he might walk his rounds in comparative peace.

Over and over he repeated his charges, pointing to the suit of blue flannel worn by the prisoner as ample proof, backed up as it was by his positive recognition of shape and figure.

Just as positively did Grip-sack Sid deny the accusation, and in his just anger at such rough handling, adding a vow to make all sorry who had taken part and lot in his capture.

"I tell ye, all, gents, that he's the 'dential critter! That's his blue rig-out, 'ceptin' his mask an' head-kiverin'. An' wouldn't he be a dum fool fer to war them in broad daylight an' in a town like this? A town what's got a good reputation fer to maintain an' hold on to! A town that'll do itself proud by carryin' cut law an' order by hangin' the p'izen imp who's done us so much dirt! An'—"

"Steady, marshal!" bluntly interposed Harlow Crampton, who had been quietly yet keenly scanning the prisoner. "Time a-plenty to talk of hangin' when the man's proved guilty beyond a doubt."

"Ain't it proved? Ain't I tellin' ye all as much, over an' times 'thout countin'?" spluttered the gaunt officer.

"And telling a foul lie every time you open your big mouth!" just as fiercely cried Grip-sack Sid. "Why, gentlemen," suddenly forcing a calmer tone, though his eyes blazed like balls of electric light. "So far from being Captain Chameleon, as that skeleton idiot asserts, I was held up by that same rascal myself, only last evening on the stage route!"

"An' ef I wasn't jest gittin' round to that same p'int my own self, then kick my britches!" spluttered Harlow Crampton, his puzzled look fading out to be replaced by a glow of honest conviction. "You hed a mule, didn't ye, stranger?"

"Durn the mule! He hed me, an' that's plenty 'nough to hang him!" savagely snarled Rice, pouncing upon the bound man. "Close in, all honest men! Don't let his pals skin him out o' our grip, now we've—"

With a swift movement Grip-sack Sid drew up his feet and planted them against that bowed form. Then, with a power doubled by rage and hatred for the man who so vilely maligned him, he shot out his feet, lifting Rice clear off the ground and sending him flying through the air, to fall with a grunt and a groan on the flinty ground.

This helped to scatter the crowd, and acting promptly, Harlow Crampton rallied several good and true men on whom he could depend, provided they were granted time for cool reflection. He barred the next mad rush made by the marshal, and by dint of rapid talking, soon produced a better state of affairs.

"An' why wouldn't we go slow a bit?" he added, earnestly, standing guard over the bound man. "He can't git away 'thout we knowin'ly turn him loose. They ain't none o' his friends bull-headed 'nough fer to think of buckin' ag'inst the hull town, like this."

"Mebbe you're one of 'em!" howled Jonah, acting more like a lunatic than his usual self, so intensely was he excited. "Down 'em both, gents! Hang the fat cuss 'long with t'other thief!"

But right there Jonah Rice took another false step. Harlow Crampton was far too well known and respected, almost loved, in Solid City, for any such outrageous insinuation to take root. And the cries that rose against the

marshal were almost as fierce as had been the sounds lifted against the bound man a few moments before.

Harlow Crampton might have turned the tables on his defamer, and possibly have given that really unpopular character a taste of the hemp he so viciously proposed for another's benefit; but he wisely preferred calling more moderate methods into play, feeling confident that justice would be done to all, now that the crowd had paused for a second thought.

Lifting his voice until he had produced a comparative calm, he made a half-apology for Jonah Rice, which that now sulky individual had not grace enough to make for his own conduct.

"He don't jest know what he's 'ither doin' or sayin', I reckon. He hed a mighty rough deal last evenin', an' he's blurred his sight by a glass or two too much, mebbe, over his troubles."

"Was I drunk when that critter held me up, a hour by sun, yest'day evenin'?" indignantly demanded the marshal.

Grip-sack Sid was eagerly watching and listening, and at that harsh sentence, he gave a start and a cry that attracted the attention of Harlow Crampton, who looked down to mutter encouragingly:

"Don't worry, stranger, fer ef you're innocent we'll clear ye, an' ef you're guilty, fidgetin' cain't save the neck o' ye!"

"Make him tell when and where he was held up!" swiftly uttered the Grip-sack Sharp.

Harlow Crampton seemed to divine the object lying back of those words, and quickly acted upon the suggestion. He believed he knew what sort of defense this stranger could offer, and though he was anything but malicious by nature, he was nowise loth to make Jonah Rice convict himself of false swearing before all that crowd.

"Waal, you *didn't* look jest like a drunken man," purposely emphasizing the gender. "An' I don't reckon you was drunk when the blue critter ketched ye short o' luck, marshal. Still, hangin' a feller critter is a mighty solemn thing, an' ef it's got to be done, let's all go at it in a lawful an' sober way, so to speak."

"Fu'st, make your charges. Not by cussin' an' ravin' like a hen with its head cut off, but quietly, calmly, decently, jest as ef you was a deacon in the church, so to speak. When an' whar, an' how did this man hold ye up, marshal?"

With difficulty Jonah Rice choked back his fierce impatience. If he could have felt reasonably confident of being backed by even a dozen stout fellows, just then, he would have risked all on the chance of killing or hanging his hated enemy. But he saw no such chance. Even those who might reasonably be counted on as aids to an impromptu hanging match, were looking his way, plainly eager to enjoy a repetition of his humiliating adventure with the Blue Chameleon.

Seeing no easier, shorter method of gaining his vengeance, he sullenly complied, trying to make his story as brief as possible. But Harlow Crampton would not consent to that. He meant to get even for that effort to turn his townsmen against him, and by pointed questions, all of which consumed time and helped bring the crowd to a better humor, he drew forth the entire adventure, making Jonah fairly writhe as he faced those laughs, those jeers and humorous comments on his novel taste in dress.

Still, Crampton was careful to make plain the point he counted on turning squarely against the marshal, and only ceased his questions after Rice had positively sworn that the "hold up" took place "an hour by sun," or a little before six o'clock.

"You have heard the charge brought against you, stranger," said Crampton, turning toward Grip-sack Sid who, despite his bonds and uncomfortable position, actually seemed to be enjoying the scene. "Have you any good defense to offer ag'inst it?"

"Raise me up, please," quietly said the Grip-sack Sharp. "Set me on my feet, so I can have a square look at that—did you call him gentleman, sir?"

"Never you mind what I called him: it's more to the p'int what *you* kin say to clear your own self," a little grimly retorted the fat member, but acting on the hint, with the aid of a sturdy neighbor.

Grip-sack Sid bit his lips sharply, but accepted the hint as well meant, choking back his anger as he stood balanced on his feet, firm and steady despite his bonds, only the blood that had trickled down over his face from his lacerated scalp betraying the fact of his having received such an ugly blow.

"You will swear that I am really the person you call the Blue Chameleon, now that you have time to take a square look at my face?" he demanded, those keen gray eyes fixed on Jonah's saturnine countenance.

"I'll take my oath on a stack o' Bibles higher'n—" began the marshal, viciously, only to meet with a truly startling interruption.

Without a single premonitory sound to betray its approach, a horse sprung around the corner of the Mint Drop, sweeping close up to

the edge of the interested crowd; and before any one could recognize more than the simple fact that it was mounted, the rider flung a leather wallet full into Rice's face, crying out tauntingly:

"Want to hang the Blue Chameleon, do ye, Granny Rice? Well, here's my neck—bring on your rope!"

Then off he dashed, a lithe, graceful figure in blue, crying back:

"Follow if you dare, Granny Rice, and I'll give you a new night-cap!"

CHAPTER XXI.

CHASING THE BLUE CHAMELEON.

As Jonah Rice saw something flying direct at his face, he instinctively flung up a hand, and more by accident than through skill on his part, the wallet fell into his hand as it rebounded from contact with his hooked nose.

Instinctively his eyes turned upon it, and with instant recognition of his own property, taken from him by the Blue Chameleon on the Black Water trail, he utter a howl of fury, almost splitting his throat as he plunged like a maddened bull through the astonished crowd;

"Ketch him—take him! Thar he goes—the Blue Chameleon!"

It all took place with such marvelous rapidity!

One moment they were watching the accuser and accused, standing face to face, with portly Harlow Crampton, his sturdy feet planted a short yard apart, his puffy fists resting with knuckles against his hips, his head cocked a bit on one side as, with truly judicial gravity he listened to first one and then the other.

The next, almost as though he had dropped from the clouds with his snorting horse, came that daring rider, to laugh them all to scorn as he raced away, flinging that taunt behind him.

Brief as was that first sight of the desperado—for swift almost as a swallow on the wing, the horseman whirled around the nearest corner—fully one half of all present recognized him by the closely-fitting garb he wore, if only through the repeated descriptions given by Jonah Rice himself that long night through.

"Darkly, deeply, beautifully blue!" was that reckless rider, from the crown of his head to where his legs were hidden by the swift movements of the horse he bestrode.

A score of hands instinctively dropped to pistol butt, but before a single weapon among them all was fairly out of its holster, the daring desperado was around the corner of the Mint Drop, leaving only a little cloud of dust, a clatter of hoofs, a wild, scornful laugh, and the last echoes of that contemptuous speech directed toward Jonah Rice.

Even before the marshal could pronounce that title, the crowd had recognized the Blue Chameleon, and with a wild shout and simultaneous surge, it started in hot pursuit.

Entirely forgotten for the time being, Grip-sack Sid was knocked from his feet and even trampled upon by those who chanced to be on the side opposite the one where the Blue Chameleon had made his dash.

Harlow Crampton, too, was overthrown, but he displayed all of his youthful agility in scrambling to his feet again, setting off in chase of the audacious outlaw, howling, yelling, brandishing his pistol with the best of his mates.

But the citizens had a cunning if daring adversary to deal with, and though several of the most active reached the corner of the building in time to catch a glimpse of the Blue Chameleon, at whom they at once opened fire without losing time to take aim, only another taunting shout came back as horse and rider dashed at full speed behind another building, where they were safe from all shots, for the present.

There seemed to be fully as much contempt as defiance in the cries sent back by the fleeing desperado, but his tactics plainly proved a degree of respect for their bullets, if naught else.

Making use of the second house as a convenient shield to his back, the Blue Chameleon pressed his horse to the utmost, making in as direct a line as practicable for the hills, toward the Black Water region. But though the animal nobly seconded his efforts, they were not out of fair pistol range when the head of the pursuit came swarming into sight, to blend yells and burning powder in about equal proportions for a brace of seconds.

Not more than that; for the fugitive, timing himself admirably, had very nearly reached another shelter, and altering his course slightly to correspond, he raced on as swift as at first, plainly showing that neither horse nor rider had been touched seriously, if touched at all, by those wildly whistling bits of lead.

Still, though good fortune had borne him company thus far, it was well for the Blue Chameleon that Solid City was of no very great extent, yet his meteor-like career might easily have come to an end on that now rosy morning.

The clattering of hoofs, the yelling and shooting, every man testing his lungs since he had so small chance to test his gun, effectually roused the town, particularly that portion of it through which the wild chase led.

Once or twice the fugitive was forced to veer from the direct line leading to freedom and safety, by some half-dressed, wholly excited cit-

izen bursting from his home, pistol or rifle in hand. Either too nearly asleep to see straight, or else naturally poor marksman, since often as not the blue-clad fugitive never even caught the sound of their lead.

Fate or fortune led him only a few yards from the front of the little building into which Jonah Rice had been chased the night before by mischievous Randolph Tucker and his mates. And that Mrs. Rice was an early riser was immediately proved, for, flinging open the front door, she stood an Amazon, so far as a buxom figure and a loaded shot-gun could combine.

The Blue Chameleon was looking back over his shoulder at his pursuers, his head turned away from the cottage, else he might not have chosen that exact moment for sending back a taunting yell and the words:

"Where's Granny Rice? I've just opened up a fresh lot of gowns and frilled night-caps!"

"Boom!" went one barrel, heavily loaded with buckshot, the recoil almost upsetting that sturdy figure, though she seemed to weigh a ton as her indignant ears drank in that foul aspersion against her lord and master.

The sentence was left incomplete by the Blue Chameleon, for, woman though she was, Mrs. Rice had come nearer "laying him out" than any of the citizens, thus far. And with his scalp prickling keenly where one of the buckshot had raked his hide, he turned in time to see that ugly muzzle lowering once more in his direction.

"I'll granny ye!" screamed Mrs. Rice, desperately, pulling trigger of the second barrel, just as the skillful rider swung low down to the further side of his beast. "I'll teach ye to—"

The recoil, heavier than the first, sent the good woman reeling back into her house, and the blue smoke shut out her view of the vile ruffian who dared insult her husband.

Once again did the heroic Amazon "show color," though this time it came from the horse, not its rider, thanks to that Indian-like trick on the part of the blue-clad figure. That spasmodic bound told him what had happened, and not daring to lose time in trying to learn just how seriously the poor animal was injured, the Blue Chameleon from that time forth bent all his energies to perfecting his escape.

For, even without his frequent backward glances, he must have known that to be overtaken now meant certain death, without judge or jury.

Though the majority of citizens were chasing him on foot, shooting whenever they could do so without too greatly endangering their own friends, quite a number had scattered to procure mounts, plainly resolved to press the chase until their long hated, greatly-detested enemy was killed or captured for the rope.

One of the most deeply interested, if not the fleetest of foot, in all that excited crowd, was Harlow Crampton, and as the chase luckily led past his own house, he tore off his coat as he puffed along, even this soon falling to the rear, thanks to his too bountiful supply of fat and flesh.

"Take it—got to ketch—Cap'n Chameleon!" he gasped, tossing the superfluous garment to his wife as he passed the door in which she was standing, then plunging into the little stable at the rear, he put a bridle on his horse as swiftly as possible, leading the animal forth and clambering upon its back without waiting to adjust a saddle.

And hence it came about that, though usually counted out of such "amusements," owing to his growing years and increasing weight, Uncle Harlow was well up with the leaders when that wild chase came to an end.

The Blue Chameleon had reached the rocky range, apparently unharmed by the storm of lead that had been sent whistling after him, turning in his saddle at the edge of the broken ground, and making a derisive gesture as he sent back a mocking yell:

"Three groans for Granny Rice! Fit ruler for Solid City!"

Then the reckless rider disappeared from sight, while his enraged pursuers kept straight on, aiming for the narrow pass through which their last glimpse had been caught.

Once there, with the outlaw lost to view, and so many patches of shale or flinty soil around them, it was blind work for a time. Only a few of the cooler-headed men even thought of picking up a trail, the majority trusting to blind luck and forging ahead, spreading out according to their taste, pistols ready for use when their keen eyes should have done their duty.

"Some o' you limber-legged boys shin up the high rocks an' see ef ye can't ketch a p'intin!" called out Harlow Crampton, whose years lent him a shrewd wit as yet denied the more excitable. "Peel up, ye younkens, an' give yer eyes a show! P'int out the line he's follerin' ef ye sight him, an' keep on p'intin' while the rest o' us ketch the pesky critter!"

In such times it only needs a loud enough voice to direct the actions of others, and in a few moments later a dozen or more agile fellows were clambering up the rocks, each one risking his neck in hopes of being the first to sight the notorious outlaw.

Then, only a few moments later, the clear,

high notes of Ran Tucker came piercing the morning air:

"I see a horse, but—"

"Where? Which way? P'int it out!" came a chorus that effectually drowned his voice, and as the briefest method of replying to all, the handsome sport threw out one arm, holding it steady until he saw all the others were rushing along that line. Then, active as a cat, eager to be in at the death, he scrambled down the rocky crag, racing along at top speed.

He heard the fierce yells that told of discovery, but there was more of disappointment than of joy in the sounds; for though the horse on which the Blue Chameleon had fled from town was found, its recent rider was missing!

"Scatter and search! He can't be far off!"

"The critter's shot, an'—"

"My hoss!" fairly howled Jonah Rice, whose long legs and savage lust for revenge had enabled him to keep up with even the horsemen.

Instant silence fell over the crowd, many among them likewise recognizing the animal, now their notice was quickened by that cry. And they stared at each other, marveling how this could be.

"Have you downed the critter?" panted Ran Tucker, coming up just then. "Where is he? Let me have a square look, and I'll—hellow!" breaking off in a tone of mingled surprise and excitement as he pointed at a scrap of paper knotted to the black mane of the animal.

He surged forward as though to secure possession of the paper, but some one was ahead of him, and holding it up where the red rays of the rising sun gave the best light, he first read, then broke into a loud laugh, turning toward Jonah Rice, who was lugubriously examining the wound inflicted on his horse by the gun of his own wife.

"It's fer you, Jonah, I reckon—haw! haw! haw!"

But Ran Tucker snatched the note before Rice could secure it, and in a clear voice he read aloud the few words scribbled with a pencil:

"Ta! ta! my sweet night-cap! See you later, venerable dame!"

The insulted marshal howled with rage, then plunged off through the rocks in search of the Blue Chameleon, with one more debt scored against the audacious knave.

And for the better part of an hour that search was pressed, without finding the slightest clew to encourage them. On such ground no trail would lie plain enough for human sight to follow, and at the end of that time, the weary, disappointed citizens had, for the most part, returned to where Jonah's horse was still hitched. Among them was Ran Tucker, who glanced at Rice half-maliciously as he said:

"Looks mighty like we were wasting time here. Let's go back and hang the Blue Chameleon Jonah caught so neatly!"

CHAPTER XXII.

GRIP-SACK SID MARKS HIS MAN.

As recorded, Sidney Harper, bound hand and foot, was knocked down and trampled over by the excited crowd when the genuine Blue Chameleon made that audacious rush. Knowing how helpless he was to resist or to escape, he shielded his head and face as much as possible, lying flat until those heavy feet had carried their owner far away.

He had just caught a glimpse of that graceful, athletic figure in blue, and had time to note his masked face before going down before that rush. He failed to catch the words cried out, but instinct told him that, most opportunely for him, the man of whose deeds he stood accused, had put in an appearance just when that appearance could do the most good, though it was highly improbable the outlaw thus risked death or capture for the purpose of rescuing a stranger.

The night-watch of the Mint Drop had followed close on the heels of the man who procured the coil of rope, but he was cool-headed enough to remember the importance of his charge, and neither took part in that exciting capture, nor broke away in chase of the outlaw.

He alone was a witness of the manner in which Grip-sack Sid lifted his head to look after the chase, and being a really kind-hearted fellow at bottom, he soon came to feel pity for the prisoner.

With a quick look around, to make sure his actions were not watched, he came over to where the Grip-sack Sharp lay, bending over him and hastily muttering:

"They'll run you up a tree, dead sure, pardner!"

"Not if there's a white man in the gang," said Harper, turning his glowing eyes that way. "They're after the real bird now!"

"Then Jonah lied? You really didn't do it?"

"Jonah lied. I didn't do it. I'm ready to prove as much before any court in the country."

The barkeeper hesitated a little longer, but then impulsively drew a knife and cut the ropes, saying:

"I believe you, pardner! But maybe they'll be harder to convince, if they fail to bag their game. Maybe they'll claim it's all a put-up job to clear you, and try hemp for luck! So—better—"

skin out and lay low until they wear the wire-edge of their mad off!"

Grip-sack Sid gave that friendly hand a firm clasp, but said nothing beyond a word of thanks, until he had restored the circulation of his limbs. But then he shook his head, positively:

"I've done nothing to run for, pardner, and I'm going to fight it out on this line if it takes a leg—or a neck! I'll never let on that you lent a hand, though, be sure of that."

The barkeeper seemed a little uneasy in mind, and possibly he regretted having yielded to that generous impulse, though he did not say so. Instead, on finding that Grip-sack Sid was firmly decided on staying right there to meet his accusers on their return, he brought out a glass of whisky and a couple of sandwiches, all of which were thankfully received by the hungry and thirsty Sharp.

"If worst comes to worst, I'll remember you in my will, pardner. It does me good to run up against a white man, after bucking against such mean samples of our breed! It just does!"

Seating himself with back against the front of the Mint Drop, Harper slowly ate the sandwiches, calmly waiting for the crowd to return from their man-hunt.

And right there he was discovered by the leaders of that grim, disappointed assembly, looking far cooler and more at ease than any one of their number, unless it might have been Ran Tucker.

Jonah Rice was with the advance, and Harlow Crampton, thanks to his good mount, which he turned loose to seek its stable, was not far behind the leaders. And though he was fully as much surprised as any at finding their recent captive a free man, he did not feel half so amazed as some that Grip-sack Sid should have lost such a glorious chance for giving leg-bail.

"Who dast to turn you loose, critter?" snarled Rice, fumbling with the butt of a revolver, longing yet hardly daring to wreak his vengeance on this stranger.

"A better man than ever stood in your boots, you long-gear'd bully and liar!" sharply retorted Grip-sack Sid, rising to his feet and boldly facing the city marshal. "Who gave you right to strike me down from behind, you brute! Who licensed you to try and lie away the life of a gentleman whose sole crime lies in his breathing the same air your filthy lungs pollute? Who?"

"I'll blow you to—"

But Harlow Crampton interposed, just in time to keep Grip-sack Sid from losing all control of himself and leaping at the throat of the brute who had so shamefully misused him.

"Simmer down, all two both o' ye! Simmer—or blamed ef I don't git up an' crawl all over ye, my own weenty self!"

"Pancakes—just pancakes! That's what they'd be, then!" croaked Ran Tucker, in awe-stricken tones.

Nothing very witty, but it brought a laugh from the crowd, and helped Grip-sack Sid recover his coolness. He fell back to the line he had marked out for himself while waiting for the crowd to return, and stuck closely to it through all that followed.

"You're right, sir," he said, quietly, nodding to Crampton. "Time enough to call that fellow to account when I have fairly cleared myself of his vile charges, in the eyes of all decent citizens."

"I reckon that'll be 'bout right, gents?" asked Harlow, with an inquiring glance around him. "Mr. Rice hes putt for'ard his charges. Ef the stranger kin prove that he was som'ers else when Jonah was held up, then I reckon we'd orter let him hev a show to do it?"

"Of course we had," boldly spoke up Ran Tucker, never missing the chance to get in a thrust at his detested adversary, the marshal. "For if we let Jonah hang *this* one, who's to go bail he won't tackle me, or you, or all of us in turn, for that matter?"

"Mighty right you be, Tucker!" grinned one of his neighbors. "Rice swore *this* was the blue critter, then afore that got cold, he whooped it off chasin' 'nother, an' so—stan' 'em up nose to nose, an' let 'em talk it out. Ef they can't, then make a ring an' let 'em fight it out!"

The marshal glared from speaker to speaker, fairly speechless from conflicting emotions. Now that he stood facing this man, his first belief returned with redoubled force. This was the one who had so shamefully humiliated him—if he could only prove it!

"Men of Solid City," began Grip-sack Sid, never cooler in his life than right then. "You all heard what a black charge that fellow brought against me. You heard him solemnly swear that I held him up, last evening about six by the clock, on the Black Water trail, ten miles from town. Have I put it correctly, gentlemen?"

A chorus of affirmations answered, and Harper spoke again:

"That is *his* story; now listen to *mine*, and bear in mind that I had just reached town in company with a young man whom all of you must know, Evan Morris, in whose companionship I passed the entire night, when Jonah

Rice foully struck me down from behind my back."

Then he went on to describe his adventures with Captain Chameleon the evening before, telling how he was held up, searched, turned adrift on his mule, which some time later carried him back to the spot where the road-agents were holding up the Centropolis stage.

"An' I see'd you thar, too!" cried Billy Trigger, pushing his way through the crowd, eagerly bearing evidence which would work to the discomfiture of his ancient enemy, the marshal. "You all know me, gents, even ef you don't know this gentleman—pure white, *he* is, an' chuck full to runnin' over with sand, too!"

"Thanks," bowed Harper, with a faint smile. "But let me tell my story, and then the jury can compare it with the one which, no doubt, you have already reported."

This he did, so far as his involuntary attack on the road-agents went, describing the fall of Captain Chameleon at his shot. At this point he had to again choke off the eager driver, but he managed to get through with his story, telling how he escaped from his mule, how he chanced across young Morris, whom he hinted had been hurt while out in the hills on a hunting expedition.

Through all he took good care not to drop aught that could betray the secret which Morris and Hastings were so anxious to preserve, and the more surely to do this, he said nothing of his second meeting with the road-agents. His long delay in reaching town he rightly attributed to the weakness of Evan Morris.

Then, without his having time to ask for it, the unanimous verdict of not guilty broke from the crowd, and before Jonah Rice could beat a retreat, Grip-sack Sid strode forward, grasping the marshal by his shoulder with his left hand as he spoke coldly, sternly:

"You struck me foul, Jonah Rice! You maliciously lied my life away as far as you could do it. Now—I'll put my mark on you!"

Touching the scalp wound on his own head, Grip-sack Sid swiftly formed a red cross on the forehead of his enemy, who hoarsely gasped:

"Durn ye—what's that fer?"

"Just my private mark, Jonah. I brand you thus, so I'll know my game when I've a little spare time to waste on such a cowardly cur!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MONEY, MONEY, WHO HAS THE MONEY?

THERE was a cold, deadly, merciless meaning underlying those words, though given in such a smooth, measured tone of voice, that Jonah Rice involuntarily recoiled, lifting a hand to draw across his face with a shivering gesture.

Grip-sack Sid gave a short laugh, his lips curling as he said:

"Soap and water can't begin to faze it, marshal."

"But soap an' water'd breed a cholery into the critter ef it was to hev a 'duction to him!" grinned Billy Trigger, probably the best pleased man in all Solid City that minute.

"W'ar yer night-cap with the frill a-floppin', Jonah!" suggested another of the crowd. "Mebbe that'll kiver up the mark so yer boss won't know ye next time!"

With that speech as a cue, quips and quirks came flying thick and fast from nearly all quarters. Rice began to realize the mistake he had made, and to feel that only a most vigorous effort could cover it over sufficiently to render life in Solid City even endurable.

To do him justice, he was not nearly so foolish as his actions since his capture by the Blue Chameleon would seem to indicate. That humiliating adventure, followed up by such a rough experience at the hands of his joking townsmen, added to the liquor he had swallowed so freely, all formed a combination which few men could have resisted.

Nor was he a coward, physically speaking. That goes without saying, however, for no coward was ever put in police charge of a lively mining-town.

"Ef I've done ye any dirt, stranger," he said, facing Grip-sack Sid, with subdued ferocity in every feature. "I'm open to give ye sech satisfaction as ye dast ax fer. I'll fight ye—"

"Or break your neck running," curtly interrupted Harper. "You'll need a full week to get your courage up to fighting pitch when you know you'll have to face a man before striking him. I can't promise you quite so long a period of grace, but unless you run away from town to escape me, I'll call on you to settle scores after I've had a bite and sup."

"Takin' water, by glory," howled one of the crowd.

"Button up!" cried Uncle Harlow, waving his stout arms much as a woman "shoo's" a hen. "They's bin too much wind turned loose a'ready, an' I'll git so mad pritty soon I'll turn to an' use one half o' ye to lick t'other with!"

Grip-sack Sid, despite his just resentment at the foul treatment he had received, was by no means offended by this interposition. Though he fully intended to punish Jonah Rice for his cowardly blow and subsequent efforts to lynch him as a thief, he knew that he was hardly in fit condition for fighting even an adversary

whom he held as cheaply as he certainly did the city marshal.

And so, under cover of the fat old peace-maker, he thrust an arm through that of his fiery advocate, honest Billy Trego, and quickly left the thick of the crowd behind them.

Thanks to the assault made upon himself, Grip-sack Sid had seen nothing of what happened to Evan Morris, but he had not a doubt as to his present safety. With such an amount of money in his care, of course he would not dare mingle in such a disorderly crowd, even for the sake of assisting a brother in distress.

Billy Trego could tell him nothing concerning Evan, since the driver had been a late arrival on the scene. He had been to bed, and was not roused until just before the chasers returned from their vain hunt for the Blue Chameleon.

Yes, Billy could guide him to the house where Conrad Hastings lived, and would be more than proud to be of service.

"It tickled me more'n a heap to see how ye rubbed it in, back yender, pardner!" he added, chuckling and beaming almost lovingly into that strong face. "An' ef you'd only jest break the stretched-out link o' sassidge in twenty pieces! An' ef I mought be nigh 'nough fer to see the hull circus while it was doin'!"

"You talked a little as though you wouldn't seriously object to taking the contract yourself," smiled Harper.

"I've tried fer the job more times then a-plenty, but jest so sure they'd somethin' turn up to bu'st it wide open! I reckon I bed him clean foul on'y last night, when I *knowed* he was tellin' a plum' lie 'bout his Cap'n Chameleon in blue, an' sech like truck, but—"

"It could hardly have been *all* lies, from what I heard and saw," frowned Harper, not a little puzzled to solve the mystery, or even to give a plausible guess at the truth.

Billy Trigger rattled on about his troubles, manly born of his natural antipathy to Jonah Rice, but Sidney Harper paid slight attention to his words until forced to answer a pointed question:

"You ain't goin' to let it drap so easy, I reckon, pardner?" You *raally* meant it when you spoke o' payin' the p'izen critter out?"

"I've put him down on my list," was the grim response.

Not many words, and they were smoothly uttered, but a storm of oaths and savage threats could not have better satisfied Billy Trego.

"A good man" himself, physically speaking, he knew how to recognize another, and without further query, he declared that he was going to hunt up a substitute to drive the stage, and give himself a holiday, so as to run no risks of missing the fun.

He pointed out the building where Conrad Hastings lived, and after volunteering to be on hand as second or simple witness, as he could best serve this new friend, the worthy driver fell back, instinctively divining that, just then, his room would be preferable to his company.

Grip-sack Sid, after a careful inspection of his soiled garments, quickly made his way to the front door, where his summons was answered after a brief interval, by Conrad Hastings in person.

"Good-morning," bowed the Grip-sack Sharp. "Will you be so kind as to inform me whether Evan Morris reached this house in safety, this morning?"

"Why do you ask? Who are you?" demanded Hastings, with unusual gruffness for him, a look of uneasy suspicion coming into his face, far paler than ordinary, and betraying signs of sore trouble.

"My name is Sidney Harper," with a faint smile as he dropped his eyes to note his own dilapidated appearance. "Sorry I have no card or letter of introduction with me, but, possibly Mr. Morris would be kind enough to vouch for me."

"Mr. Morris is—not exactly well this morning," hesitated Hastings, drawing back a little and showing signs of a desire to close the door.

"Then he *did* get here all right?" with an involuntary breath of relief, lowering his voice a little as he added: "I am the man who found him in the river last night, and helped him to reach town."

"Then where were you when he lost—"

Impulsively Conrad Hastings blurted out so much before he could lock his lips. Quite enough to startle Grip-sack Sid, who quickly slipped through the opening into the hall, sharply muttering:

"Lost what? I can swear Evan Morris had that packet at the moment I was knocked down by a crazy fool as Captain Chameleon. He *couldn't* have lost it, man!"

"Lpst or stolen, it's gone!"

"Gone!" echoed Harper, amazed at the gloomy announcement. "After all we went through, to lose it just when— Where's Morris?"

"In bed, broken down by his harts, and—"

"Take me to him, please," with an effort at calming his strong excitement, feeling that all the more essential since he saw that, even yet, Mr. Hastings was inclined to look at him with suspicion. "That will be the quickest method of convincing you that I am his and your friend in this mixed-up affair."

"Is there anything I can do, father?" asked a clear, sweet voice from the head of the stairs, and as Grip-sack Sid looked up, he bowed with instinctive admiration and respect for that pale, yet lovely face.

"I wish to see Mr. Morris, ma'am," said Harper, quickly. "Please tell him that a Brother Workman is here, and the same who helped him through the hills to the edge of town last night."

Conrad Hastings gave a start and a low ejaculation, thrusting out his hand and clasping that of this dilapidated stranger. No longer a stranger, though, after a few seconds. A brother, then, who might be trusted as implicitly as one of his own family.

Knowing now that he would have no serious difficulty in procuring the desired interview, Sidney Harper briefly explained why he had lost sight of Evan Morris, and something of his rough experience since.

"As soon as I could clear myself I looked for him. Not seeing anything of him during the trouble, I expected that he had hastened to you, as in duty bound. Now—who helped him here after we parted? For helped he surely must have been."

Hastings shook his head despondently. He told how he had been roused from sleep by a heavy pounding at the front door, and how he found Evan, wounded and weak; but beyond that he seemed all in a fog. He had not recognized the man who left so hastily after knocking. He could not even form a vague guess as to his identity.

"Don't Morris remember who helped him home?"

Hastings gave a bewildered start. He had not thought to question Evan on that point, the loss of the money had so completely upset his usually cool, keen wits.

"Mr. Morris is not strong enough to talk," quietly put in Ida Fenwick, who had slowly descended the stairs during the conversation. "Serious though the money loss be, it is trifling when compared with the health—it may be life—of my father's nephew."

"Is he conscious?" crisply asked Harper, and when he received a reluctant assent, he resolutely added: "All right. Show me to his room, Brother Hastings. I'll answer for his life. I feel partly responsible for that money, and the quicker we strike a trail, the better show we'll have for recovering it."

Ida protested, speaking to her father and ignoring this rough-looking stranger, for whom she had taken a stronger dislike at once. But Hastings yielded to the strong will, and a couple of minutes later Sidney Harper was bending over the bed on which Evan Morris lay, gently shaking his sound shoulder.

Mrs. Morris, who was watching by her son, tried to protest, but even she was silenced by the glad cry which the wounded man uttered as his eyes opened, to recognize the man who had saved him from perishing on that eventful night.

"Thank Heaven! you found the packet?"

"Not yet, brother," said Harper, clasping his hand, trying to lend the sorely weakened man a portion of his own vitality. "But I will find it, if mortal man may. Now try to think: who helped you home, after that fool struck me down?"

"Who helped—why, it was Randolph Tucker! I thought—but you surely don't suspect him of stealing the packet?"

In his amazement, Evan started up in bed, but Grip-sack Sid gently forced him back, as he spoke again:

"Some one stole the packet, that's positive. I can make oath that you had it safe in your breast when we struck town. You kept one hand pressed over it all the time. You remember that, brother?"

"Yes, I remember. And I thought I had it safe until—I looked for it down-stairs!"

"Think once more. Try to recall all that happened after we were parted. Did any one else touch you, besides Randolph Tucker?"

Evan Morris shut his eyes, pressing his sound hand over the lids, trying his best to clear away the mists which hung over the past. For a time he was unsuccessful, but then, with a sudden start, he said:

"Yes! I remember! Uncle Harlow was doing something—was trying to help me, or—"

"It couldn't have been Crampton!" impulsively cried Hastings, a faint flush coming into his haggard face. "I'd almost as soon doubt Evan himself!"

"Who is Randolph Tucker, then?" asked Harper, calmly.

"A gambler and sport, I believe, but surely he wouldn't—"

"Somebody did, that's positive, Mr. Hastings. I'll hear the rest after I've had a little chat with this sport of yours."

CHAPTER XXIV.

GRIP-SACK SID SETTLES ONE SCORE.

SIDNEY HARPER turned abruptly away from the bed, but paused at a little cry from Evan Morris.

"What are you going to do, Harper?"

"Going to recover that packet and place it in

the hands of its rightful owner, if any one man can do it," was the cold response.

But then, turning back to the bed, taking the feverish hand of the wounded man between his own, he added, his tones softened until they almost sounded musical, his face filled with powerful yet suppressed emotion:

"Providence led me to you, Morris, a brother in sore distress. You gave me the grip of good-fellowship, and appealed to me in the name of our beloved Order. I vowed to see you safely through the night if mortal man could do it. Now—you are helpless, but I can and will work for both of us!"

Without waiting to hear thanks or remonstrance against his attempting more work before recruiting his physical powers, Harper left the chamber, followed down-stairs by Hastings.

The old gentleman prevailed so far as to win Harper into eating a few bites, and swallowing a glass of good wine. He asked permission to accompany him on his search for Tucker, but was refused.

"Only the thief besides ourselves suspects aught of this heavy loss, but you have more enemies than you think, and your face would surely betray the truth to some of them. As a stranger, I can work far better alone than in your company."

Grip-sack Sid was firm on that point, and Hastings was forced to promise that he would not leave the premises until Harper returned to report. And then, leaving the house, the commercial traveler was met at the gate by Billy Trigger, who genially cried out:

"Ketched a sub, an' now I'm foot-free an'—beeled, pardner?"

Grip-sack Sid frowned as he gave a start. Surely he was getting "rattled," for never until that moment had he thought of arming himself. Yet, how could he hope to force restitution from one desperate enough to steal such an amount of money?

"Which is why I come back at a lope, pardner!" chuckled Billy Trigger, pulling a brace of revolvers, from his many-pocketed coat and thrusting the butts into Harper's hands. "I knowed how clean Cap'n Chameleon ginerly does his jobs, an' I lowed you mought want a gun or so: fer Jonah is beeled ail over, be mighty sure!"

Until that moment nothing had been further from Harper's mind than a hostile meeting with the redoubtable marshal, just at present; but he accepted the weapons, Billy assuring him that they "shot to a hair" when held straight.

Not knowing how soon he might need such a hearty backer, Grip-sack Sid did not wish to bluff Billy off too sharply, and they passed into town together. Yet he intended to shake the enthusiastic driver off as soon as he could decently do so.

"He's white," was his mental decision, as they walked along together, Billy looking in all directions for Tucker, after Harper requested to be shown the sport, if possible. "But in this matter the fewer fingers the better the pie! If Morris made no mistake, the cash can't be turned over for two days yet, and even if we get it back, it will have to be guarded just that much longer!"

He was still musing after this fashion, when Trego, who had one hand through Harper's left arm, quickly jerked him back between two buildings, hastily whis ering:

"Yender he is, by glory!"

"Show him to me, please," quietly said Harper, naturally mistaking that indefinite pronoun.

"I don't reckon I'd know the gentleman without having him indicated."

"Not know—Granny Rice?" spluttered Billy, wide eyed.

"I thought you meant Randolph Tucker," with a dark scowl coming into his strong face at that detested name.

"We kin come out onto the p'izen critter 'thout his hev'n' time to dodge or run, by makin' over this way, pardner!" whispered the excited driver, tugging at an arm.

But Grip-sack Sid deftly freed himself, stepping out where he had a free view down the street, to instantly recognize the gaunt, ungainly figure of the marshal, walking slowly along, but plainly on the keen alert, no doubt watching for the man who had so audaciously branded him on the forehead.

At sight of the brutal ruffian who had assailed him after such a cowardly fashion, the blood of the Grip-sack Sharp began to boil in his veins, and all memory of Tucker or the missing package fled from his mind for the time being.

Only pausing to be sure his revolver was where it could be used in a hurry, should the occasion arise, Grip-sack Sid swiftly strode down the street, using no particular caution so far as his footfalls went, to escape discovery by his enemy.

And the two men were a score or more yards apart when Jonah Rice whirled about, alarmed by that approach, his right hand instantly dropping to his pistol-butt.

Only to shrink visibly as he saw Grip-sack Sid cover him with a revolver, at the same time crying out sharply:

"Try to draw, and I'll kill you like a dog, Granny Rice! I ought to blow you through, as fit pay for the coward's blow you dealt me, but

—steady!" his voice cold and deadly as fate itself. "Move a peg until I give you leave, and I'll kill you!"

By that magic which enables men to scent a coming row, even this soon nearly a dozen men were witnesses, with others hurrying toward the spot. But Grip-sack Sid had eyes only for the one: Jonah Rice.

"Give me a show, ye devil!" hoarsely panted the fellow, showing his yellow teeth much like a cornered wolf. "I'll fight ye—"

"I mean that you shall, but as you chose your way once, it's my turn now. Hold up your hands! Up with them, or I'll blow your roof off in just ten seconds!"

While speaking, Grip-sack Sid had been advancing, and now stood less than a dozen feet from his enemy. His face and voice proved that he meant each word he uttered, and with a despairing groan, Rice flung up his empty hands as Harper began to count.

"Good enough, so far, pardner," with a slight nod toward Billy Trigger, who was hugely enjoying the scene. "Oblige me by disarming Granny Rice, will you?"

"Don't—it's bloody murder!" gasped the marshal, yet not daring to lower his hands, even to hinder Trego from removing his weapons.

"You're a liar, born and bred, Granny Rice!" contemptuously cried the Grip-sack Sharp, tossing his own weapons to Billy Trigger, then stripping off his coat and vest. "I'd be ashamed to waste a good shell on such carrion, and—here I come!"

And "here he did come," with a vengeance!

It was a fair warning, but Jonah Rice failed to comprehend its full force or meaning, so utterly was he bewildered by his complete discomfiture by this sturdy stranger. He had fully anticipated a shot when his weapons were taken from him, and though he mechanically stuck out his long arms as Grip-sack Sid crossed that interval at a bound, they were deftly brushed aside, and one fierce stroke took him in the wind, shooting his head forward as he doubled over, only to add to the force of that swiftly following blow.

Back his head snapped, the blood flying in a spray from his prominent nose. And with a swift lock and trip, Grip-sack Sid flung him on his back, adding his own weight to the fall.

Ordinarily a lover of fair play, and a stickler for the rules of the ring where fists were brought into play, just now all Harper cared for or thought of was to punish the ruffian who had so brutally assaulted him on such a flimsy pretense. And, too, he knew that he was far from being at his best, after all he had passed through with of late.

This by way of explaining why Sidney Harper broke his rule of never "hitting a man when he's down."

Settling astride of the half-stunned marshal, pinning an arm to the ground with each knee, gripping his throat with his left hand and poisoning the other, tightly clinched, over that purpling face, he cried:

"Beg, you cur! Own up that you're not even the shadow of a man. Say that you'll wear petticoats and nightcaps for the rest of your natural life, or—"

Down fell his fist with a sickening sound as Rice desperately strove to cast him off.

It was a disagreeable sight—or would have been if the sufferer had been less universally disliked and detested—and no further details need be given here, save that after heavy punishment, Jonah Rice huskily admitted all that Grip-sack Sid demanded. And then, asking Billy Trigger for a knife, Harper sawed off one side of those huge mustaches, grimly laughing:

"As a self-confessed old woman, you have no right to wear hair on your face, Granny Rice. And now, get up. And bear this in mind: if you dare lift a finger against me again, I'll kill you without mercy!"

CHAPTER XXV.

RAN TUCKER CLEARS UP ONE POINT.

WITH those words Grip-sack Sid sprang lightly to his feet, leaving the defeated marshal to follow suit as soon as he pleased.

Harper paid no attention to the ringing cheers which greeted him, though the sounds must have told him how popular was his victory. But he knew that he had forced Jonah Rice to swallow a bitter pill, and from his past experience with men of his class, he more than half expected to be assailed with deadly weapons the instant his antagonist could gain possession of such.

Thus it was that he paid no attention to the others, keeping his eye on Jonah, while giving Billy Trigger back the borrowed knife and receiving from him his discarded garments and pistols.

The marshal acted like one partially dazed, slowly rising to a sitting posture, staring blankly around him, but more like one just rousing from a drunken sleep than a sensitive man who hears from all sides jeers and jests and uncomplimentary remarks.

An unsteady hand rose to his nose, rapidly swelling to twice its ordinary thickness. Then—his fingers fluttered curiously about his mouth, tugging at one side of his drooping mustache—the pride of his heart this many a year—then

passing over the ragged stubble left by that ruthless knife.

"Gone is thy pride, vanished thy glory—one-half of it, anyway, most noble Jonah!" mocked a clear, mellow voice from among the crowd. "Brace up, noble Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance! We'll all chip in to pay the barber's bill, and if you don't look quite so ferociously melancholy and pathetically interesting, your mug and nightcap will correspond all the better!"

By this time Harper had put on his garments, and was in possession of the pistols loaned him by Billy Trego, who was hopping about like a pea on a hot griddle, too hugely delighted to stand still, or even to find a taunt to fling at his ancient antipathy.

Being thus secure against an assault the Grip-sack Sharp could afford to let his gaze leave his antagonist for a space, and his still glowing eyes at once singled out that speaker.

This was no difficult task. Randolph Tucker was never one to hide his light under a bushel, and always formed a prominent figure in whatever company he was found. And though Grip-sack Sid had only instinct to guide him, he more than half believed that he had found the man of whom he had started in search.

Only a single glance did he permit himself, then turned back to Jonah Rice, who was rising to his feet, moving and acting like a man in a waking dream. And lightly tapping him on a shoulder to both call attention and insure understanding, Grip-sack Sid spoke crisply:

"We have each had our innings, Jonah Rice. You took yours first, by jumping on me behind my back. I downed you from in front. But, after all, there's mighty little difference between your wrong and my half-right. You played the cur, I the wolf. And if you were even half a man I'd beg your pardon for what I have done this morning for the first time in my life: strike a man when he's down."

"Only tit for tat, stranger," laughingly chipped in Tucker, by this time forming one of the inner circle. "If you hadn't skinned his dog, be mighty sure your nocturnal feline would have lost her natural overcoat together with her lease of existence. Jonah had a most mighty terrible clutch before he lost his grip—and took to starch and muslin frills!"

The marshal stared from one to the other, his face and manner one of feeble ferocity, mixed with stupid bewilderment. He was still mechanically fingering that line of ragged stubble, though it was easy to see he could not, as yet, fully comprehend his loss.

"I don't—ef you want to fight any more—I'm ready!" he mumbled, with a reviving spark of his old courage.

"That's for you to say, Jonah Rice," coldly nodded the Grip-sack Sharp. "I marked you for punishment, and I believe I've given you good measure."

"Ay! to overflowing!" cried irrepressible Randolph.

"That lets me out, unless you see fit to come again. If you do—well, I give you full and public warning that you must kill me outright, or I'll lay you out for a coffin!"

Without waiting for a reply, Grip-sack Sid turned from his battered antagonist, and slipping a hand through the arm of Randolph Tucker, made his way through the crowd in company with the gambler.

Tucker seemed to flinch from that touch, at first, and for a moment or two he held back. But as Harper's fingers closed about his arm and their owner showed no signs of parting company, the sport yielded compliance to that silent command: for command it surely was.

Neither spoke until fairly clear of the crowd, half of which were cheering the victor and looking as though the faintest of encouragement would turn them into a triumphal escort while the other moiety found congenial employment in baiting the city marshal, now effectually cast down from the pedestal on which he had recently been posing.

"You wound him up neatly, pardner," said Tucker, with a half-shy glance from the corner of his eyes into that cold, hard face at his shoulder. "Pity you were so pressed for time!"

"By which you mean?"

"That it was cramming a three volume novel into a single chapter. You could have spun it out without end, and Solid City would have paid double price for reserved seats."

"Good Lawd!" exploded Billy Trigger, who was trotting along on the other side of the Grip-sack Sharp, comically like a terrier admiring a mastiff. "Never begun to hev so mighty much fun sence I was foalded! Hed to unbuckle my crooper to keep from chokin'! Hed to—"

"Steady, gentlemen!" half-frowned, half-laughed Harper, flashing a keen look from one face to the other, like one in search of covert ridicule. "Butter's all right in its place, but I'm not partial to it on both sides at the same time. Which is to say: dip lightly!"

"Well," laughed Tucker, "I reckon you're right. It isn't quite so much what you did, as the fellow you did it to. Jonah has made himself mighty obnoxious of late, without actually offering an excuse for a thrashing."

"That's what!" vigorously nodded Billy

Trego. "An' takin' most mighty good keer fer to 'void gittin' into a corner whar he hed to give or take—dug-gun him! But now—you dressed him down fit to suit the queen, pardner! Only—keep all two both eyes open! Fer he's rank p'izen, he is, an' ef he kin git ia 'nother lick from kiver, he'll make surer work than he did this time!"

"I was just thinking something of the sort, Billy, and if you'll be so kind as to—may I ask a favor, old man?"

"Ef it's down to my last pa'r o' britches, pardner!" enthusiastically spluttered Trego. "Why, after what you've done this day, I'd feel willin' to j'ine Jonah in a contract to war out all the nightcaps an' petticoats an'—an' sech-like doin's—in Solid City!"

"Thanks, muchly. Then please keep an eye on Jonah, and let me know if you see him loading his guns for a pitched battle, will you?"

Billy Trigger seemed fairly beside himself with delight at being trusted so far by the man who had "downed" his ancient enemy, and away he trotted, eager to begin work.

"Neatly done, I must admit!" softly breathed Ran Tucker, smiling faintly as he watched the little bantam away. "Do you handle all men as readily, Mr. Harper?"

"You suspect—what?" slowly asked Grip-sack Sid, his hand dropping out of the gambler's arm as he turned to face him.

Blue eyes met gray, but only for a moment. Despite his proverbial nerve and coolness under strain, Ran Tucker seemed nervous and ill at ease, though he spoke with affected lightness:

"Well, I'd hardly pick out 'suspect' as the correct term, Mr. Harper. *Know* comes closer the bull's-eye. Your first glance hinted as much, but your touch on my arm talked in letters a foot high."

"I'm not quite certain I comprehend your meaning, Mr. Tucker."

"I'm the next man on your black list for a thrashing, I believe?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Because, if a rascal had gotten me into so much trouble, I'd never rest easy until I had painted him blue, green and yellow!" frankly laughed the gambler, as by magic casting aside his unusual embarrassment and gazing straight into those eyes: filled with a thinly veiled fire, just now.

"Then you must have done something you are ashamed of; may I ask just what that something is?"

Tucker cast a swift, keen glance around. No one was near them, and only one or two men were in sight. There was little danger of interruption, whether these preliminaries meant simply talk or a fight.

"If by that you mean have I done anything I would not do over again, under the same circumstances, I'll tell you no. Sill, I'm sorry that you had to suffer for my little trick; for suffer you *did*, before coming out on top in the end."

"Please talk a bit plainer. I fail to catch on."

"Well, you see, it's a new thing for Ran Tucker to eat humble-pie, dished up by his own hands, and I've got to get the run of it, first. But—in one word—only for me, I don't reckon Jonah would have tackled you so mighty brash, this morning!"

"You mean that you egged him on?"

"In one sense, yes. Not that I pointed you out, or anything of that sort. I'd have held his fool' hand if I'd been nigh enough. But I've done my level best for a month past to get Rice on a wire-edge to down Captain Chameleon."

"You see, it started after this fashion. As ill luck would have it, the gentleman in crimson held up the stage by which I was coming back from Centropolis, loaded down with spoils: had put in a solid week teaching the would-be sports how to conjure with the poker deck, you comprehend?"

"And Chameleon swept the deck?"

"He just did! Called me, showed a full, and raked down the pot! And when the other pilgrims told how like a little lamb I stood the racket, Jonah just got up on his hind legs and howled—howled so long and so loud that I finally waxed weary, not to say sick of his eternal chin-music."

"Why didn't I lick the fellow? Well, any one could get even *that* way, and I always *did* object to following the beaten roads. I felt that I ought to get even, but I wanted to do so after an original fashion."

"Outwardly I took my medicine like a little man, and incidentally made it pay my expenses. A man can't joke another and do himself full justice with the cards. And while the other sports laughed and jested, I stuck to my knitting. But that's merely by the way."

"Jonah was my duck, and I put in all my spare time pampering his vanity, leading him on to boast louder and more freely as to what he would do in case Captain Chameleon should ever turn so foolish mad as to attempt holding up the hearse while *he*, the one and only Jonah, was a passenger. But though I felt pretty certain some of that wind must find its way to the gentleman in red tights, time passed on without my bait being snapped up, and Jonah actually became unbearable."

"To simmer him down a bit, I turned about and began bully-ragging him for not capturing the captain, and as I have the gift of gab, when I really try to get there, I soon had Jonah in over his head and ears. Hot water, too, since the boys all backed me up. And so—well, after Jonah was actually held up by the Blue Chameleon, and sent into town rigged out in feminine regimentals, you can guess how eager he was to play even. And so—the sight of your blue clothes, with him more than half drunk, simply set him wild!"

"And is this your *only* reason for thinking I held a grudge against you, Mr. Tucker?" asked the Grip-sack Sharp.

"Isn't it cause enough?" asked Tucker, his handsome face flushing and his blue eyes drooping before that keen gaze.

"Well, hardly. You're holding something back, pardner!"

"You're right again!" impulsively cried Tucker, frankly meeting that gaze. "I played the Blue Chameleon: make the worst of it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHICH ONLY THICKENS THE FOG.

GRIP-SACK SID was prepared for a startling announcement the moment that bold gaze met his, but this was not exactly what he expected to hear.

From the very first he had been convinced that Randolph Tucker had a secret which he dreaded to have discovered. The peculiar thrill which his fingers felt in that muscular arm at the first contact, told him so much. And the very fact that the sport bore him company without objection, while so plainly disinclined, multiplied the proof.

Yet this was not the face, not the eyes, of a thief.

Though doing so after a covert fashion, Harper had put in his time trying to read that face, and this was the conclusion he arrived at, even while feeling almost certain that its owner *was* a thief. Who else could have taken the money while Evan Morris lay helpless? Surely not "Uncle Harlow" Crampton!

Having made that blunt announcement, half defiantly, half sheepishly, Randolph Tucker stood facing the Grip-sack Sharp, his arms folded tightly across his bosom, like one who is fighting against the instinctive prompting to grip a weapon in self-defense.

For, favorite though he was with nearly all Solid City, Tucker knew that little mercy would be shown to the man who had so maliciously played with them all. Even his warmest friends would be eager to lend a hand at the lynching of Captain Chameleon!

He plainly expected Harper to jerk out a pistol and cover him, but instead of so doing, the Grip-sack Sharp gazed into his eyes, doubt, curiosity and admiration for the man's pluck mingling in his own orbs.

"You played the Blue Chameleon!"

"Put it I *was* the Blue Chameleon!"

"Then I owe you a vote of thanks for jerking the noose over my head, Mr. Tucker!" impulsively exclaimed Harper, one hand going out for a friendly grip. "Only for your coming on the stage just as you did, I really believe Jonah Rice would have yanked me up a tree!"

Ran Tucker kept his arms tightly folded, shaking his head, adding in graver tones:

"You don't seem to catch on. I mean that I played Captain Chameleon in blue, and sent Jonah Rice back to Solid City in frills."

Harper's smile faded away, and his hand dropped to his side. This was something more serious than he had at first supposed. For, though he could see the improbabilities, now, until that moment he had thought Tucker had simply copied after the chameleon in blue, for the purpose of saving an innocent man from the rope, and at the same time turning the laugh all the more completely against a man whom he disliked.

"Now you know the worst, Mr. Harper. What am I to expect?"

"What would you do in my place?"

"That depends. Possibly I might pull a gun and either make a notch, or take Captain Chameleon to the crowd for their disposal."

"You can guess what that disposition would amount to?"

"Pulling hemp—what else?" with a soft, yet reckless laugh, his gaze unflinching, his arms still folded, though Grip-sack Sid was toying with the butt of a revolver all the while.

"But you didn't hold up Rice for plunder. You were simply playing a joke on a blustering bully. A joke, too, over which half the town has laughed until each man has sore ribs."

"If the joke had been confined to Granny Rice of course I'd be solid enough with the crowd. But, unfortunately, I had to run it in on all of them this morning. So—pitch the trump, pardner."

"Don't be in such a rush. Time enough to have your neck well stretched before the dinner-bell rings. So—let's sit down and chin a weenty bit."

Now fully as cool as this self-admitted road-agent, Grip-sack Sid dropped to the ground,

curling his legs up Turk-fashion, gazing up as he nodded an invitation to follow suit.

Ran Tucker visibly hesitated, for it was his turn to wonder what the other intended doing. But as Grip-sack Sid repeated his gesture, the sport dropped down opposite him, taking matters as they came.

"Can't you throw a little more light on the subject, pardner?" asked Harper, seemingly with no other subject in his mind, though all the time he was trying to read what might lie back of that slightly embarrassed expression, and wondering how best to approach the important object which had led him to seek the company of this man.

"Why not?" with a short laugh. "I hatched it up as a joke, but the way matters have panned out I reckon the laugh will be on me in the end. So—just as well let everybody know how that laugh was born."

"You never tried to play Captain Chameleon before, then?"

Ran Tucker opened his eyes widely, a slight flush coming into his handsome face. He seemed to think an insult was intended; but then, remembering what he had already admitted, he smothered his resentment.

"No, sir. I had no occasion. I would not have tried it this time, only Jonah Rice actually drove me into something to take him off the perch. His constant wind-blows—"

"I can give a guess as to what he was, though I never made his acquaintance until this morning," was the dry interjection.

"Which is a polite reminder that I'm setting myself up as his successor in the same business?" laughed Tucker, good-naturedly. "All right—business goes, and I'm talking straight to the mark!"

"I told you how I kept Jonah on his high horse, thinking that, in self-defense, Captain Chameleon would chip in. I waited for him until further patience ceased to be a virtue, then I set my own wits to work."

"I couldn't get hold of material of the right color without running too great risk of being suspected, and so, knowing that a genuine chameleon thinks nothing of altering its hues, without taking the trouble to undress or buy a new suit, I took a certain young lady, who shall ever remain nameless, as far as this matter is concerned, into my confidence, and between us we got up that famous blue rig-out."

"Yesterday my chance came for the first time, and I made the most of it. I stopped Jonah, all by my lonesome self, though he did howl about an army. I stripped him, or made him strip, rather, then put on his fancy regimentals, gave his horse the tail-spur, and dispatched him for town, cutting across myself to see the sport."

"It must have been huge, from what little I've gathered since," nodded Grip-sack Sid, as Tucker ceased speaking, in order to laugh the more heartily. "But how did you manage the second appearance so neatly? Naturally that interests me the most."

"Jonah hit you foul, and had the gang on your back before I could get a chance to chip. Of course I knew his mistake, but couldn't tell the whole crowd just how I knew it so well. I kept Jonah from shooting you, though, and then, asking Crampton to play for time until I could rally some good men, I ran off to—"

"Alone, or did you take some one with you?"

"That's so! I came mighty nigh forgetting," with a frank nod in answer to that crisp question and sharper look. "I helped young Morris home, for I saw he was hurt, and—holly smoke!" his eyes opening widely as they turned upon Harper.

"Forgotten another point, pardner?" with a faint smile.

"Why, Morris must have been with you!"

"Didn't you hear me say as much, at my—my trial, call it?"

"I wasn't there," laughing again. "I saw that I'd have to work mighty lively if I didn't want to have an innocent life on my conscience, so I just hustled Morris home, then cut and run for my blue suit, put it on, stole Jonah's own horse, so as to run less risk of discovery through using my own nag, and chipped in just as matters began to look mighty bilious for you, pardner!"

"It was a bit risky, but oceans of fun, for all that! Mrs. Rice gave me the closest call, though, and put a leak or two into the poor horse. So, as safest and best, I left the critter in the hills, with a bit of note for Jonah, then stripped and hid my skin in a hole. After the crowd got scattered among the rocks, it was easy enough for me to slip out and mix in. Then, when the hunt was given up, I came back with the rest, meaning to pull you through if it took a leg."

"I owe you thanks for so much, anyway," with a forced smile. "But, to tell the honest truth, I didn't draw you apart from the crowd to pump you on this point."

"What else can I say or do for you? I'm eating humble-pie—all you can set before me, remember."

"Well, you helped Evan Morris home, you admit. Now I can swear that at the moment Jonah Rice knocked me cold, Morris had a cer-

tain valuable package in his possession. But—when he came to, at home, that packet was nowhere to be found!"

"What?" with an indignant flush, starting to his feet. "You don't dare even to hint that I—that I stole it!"

"I give no hints, Mr. Tucker," coldly uttered Harper, also rising, one hand on a pistol-butt. "I simply state blunt facts. That package was not lost, but stolen. You helped Morris home. He had it when you took charge of him, but had it not when you left him at his door. No other person even touched him while—"

With a sudden cry Tucker turned and bounded swiftly away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A QUEER LINK IN THE CHAIN.

GRIP-SACK SID was holding himself ready to meet and defeat an attack, but this totally unexpected action took him by surprise. Not only was it unlooked-for, but the action itself was rank folly.

Swift as thought his pistol came forth and dropped to a level, covering Ran Tucker before he had made his third stride.

"Halt! I'd rather not kill you, man, but—halt!"

Not loud enough to spread the alarm, but with stern resolution ringing through every syllable, that was a command only a fool or a thoroughly desperate fugitive would have disobeyed.

Randolph Tucker was neither the one nor the other, though his last action savored strongly of both conditions. He threw up his hands and turned to face the Grip-sack Sharp just in time!

Though with a strange reluctance to fire upon this man, Harper was on the point of pressing the trigger, rather than trust to a chase and hand-to-hand grapple in his present condition.

"Don't shoot—I'm begging!" quickly cried Tucker, his face flushing hotly as he saw that leveled weapon.

"I'll shoot only if you make me, but when I do pull, I make it count. Give me your word not to run, and I'll treat you as white as the nature of this ugly job'll let me."

"Well, I'll be—blessed!" ejaculated Tucker, his handsome face the field of curiously-blending emotions. "Did you really reckon I was fool enough to try to run away because I was guilty of—Oh, now, come!"

"It was foolish, that's certain," with a grim smile as he reached the side of the gambler, his weapon lowered, but still held with hammer raised. "If I'd been as quick on the trigger as some men, you'd be past repenting your folly, Mr. Tucker."

"Can I twist my neck enough to see if Uncle Harlow has laid out a new course, pardner?"

"What do you mean? Don't try any tricks on travelers, Mr. Tucker!"

"I mean that I caught sight of Harlow Crampton, just as you made me remember that there was at least one man besides myself who had the handling of Evan Morris this morning, and without stopping to explain, or even dreaming that any gentleman could possibly mistake me for a—Look ye, Mr. Harper!" with sudden anger coming into his face and voice as his hands dropped to a level with his breast, doubled up in true pugilistic fashion. "I can lick the man that dares even to hint I'm any kin to a thief!"

Grip-sack Sid stepped back a pace, his weapon in readiness for use if such an extremity was forced upon him. But, even with the appearances so decidedly against the gambler, he could not yet fully believe him guilty of stealing the money package. If the theft was finally brought to his door, then Harper would never again try to judge a man by his face or eyes.

"You don't mean to charge Harlow Crampton with being the thief?"

"I'd heap sooner think you cribbed it," was the blunt retort. "I simply wish to prove to you that you lie—under a mistake—when you say I was the only person who touched Evan Morris after he hit town this morning."

While these swift interchanges were taking place, Grip-sack Sid was using his brain, nor were his eyes entirely filled with this one figure alone.

He saw a portly figure at some little distance, walking as rapidly as short legs and shorter breath would permit, in a direction which angled sharply past the spot where they now stood. He recognized Harlow Crampton, as Randolph Tucker had intimated. And that recognition brought back the words uttered by Evan Morris, shortly before he left his side: that "Uncle Harlow" had also assisted him in some manner.

His decision was rapidly formed, and curtly expressed in words:

"I'm going to sift this loss to the very bottom. Lead the way to cut off Crampton, and I'll follow. Don't try another jump, or you might scare my gun into talking!"

"It's even odds that I'll lick you yet, Harper," nodded Tucker, his blue eyes glittering vividly. "Half an hour ago, I'd have laid ten thousand to a cent against it."

Nevertheless, he turned and strode swiftly away, taking a course that would cut across the

line followed by the fat man. He seemed totally unconscious of the armed man who trod close to his heels, calling out cheerily after a bit:

"Hallo! Uncle Harlow! Whither bound in such a mighty hurry?"

"Git out! Don't talk to me!" spluttered the fat member, with a comical side-fling of his puffy hand toward the speaker. "Ain't got time. Lost heap sight too much a'ready. Good Lord—yes!"

"But if I want you to go my bail, Uncle Harlow?"

"Your—git out, critter! I'm on business—an' sech business! Holy Abraham! If I was half as little as I feel, billy-be-dug-gun ef I'd cast a shadder big 'nough fer to be a rumbeller fer a new hatched midge! I jest wouldn't, now!"

Uncle Harlow spoke in puffing tones of utter disgust, but doggedly pressed forward, not even taking time to cast a stray glance that way.

Ran Tucker turned a look upon Harper, the ghost of a smile coming into his handsome face as he muttered guardedly:

"Dollars to dimes there's your missing property, Mr. Harper! And Uncle Harlow never stole it, either!"

The same startling suspicion had occurred to Grip-sack Sid, though he had seen too much of wild life and trickery to be cast entirely off his guard. He felt that he had ample excuse for acting as he had, and there is always time enough to make an apology while life lasts.

"Are you going to call on Conrad Hastings, Mr. Crampton?" he asked, over Tucker's shoulder, but Uncle Harlow only gave him that impatient gesture by way of answer.

Beyond a doubt something had taken place to greatly excite the old fellow, and as they were now only a short distance from the house owned by Hastings, Harper thought it hardly best to insist on a clearer answer to his question.

Seemingly too much in earnest to notice the fact that they were keeping close behind him, Crampton entered the yard, reached the door and—almost drove his fat fist into the pale, anxious face of Conrad Hastings himself!

"I saw you coming, and—walk in, gentlemen, all!" hurriedly explained and invited the host, in one breath. "If you have any news of—what's the matter, Crampton, old friend?"

For the moment his portly figure passed the threshold, Uncle Harlow turned and flung his weight against the door, trying to exclude the two men following after.

"Help—keep 'em out until I've—ugh!"

The door flew open, sweeping Crampton along with it, until he hit the wall with a force that drove the wind from his lungs in an explosive grunt. And speaking in a cold, almost harsh tone, Harper said:

"Here are the two gentlemen who assisted Evan Morris this morning, Mr. Hastings. One of them ought to be able to tell you about that lost or stolen package."

"That's just what I run the legs o' me off comin' fer!" spluttered Uncle Harlow, sinking down on the stairs, puffing like a porpoise as he rammed a hand into his breast, to jerk out—the oil-skin covered packet!

"Oh, Uncle Harlow!" ejaculated Ran Tucker, lifting up both hands and eyes, the latter "in fine frenzy rolling," as the irrepressible sport hollowly added: "The pity of it! You, a bare-faced, bald-headed thief! You a robber of—where's my wiper?"

With a choking cry Conrad Hastings caught at the packet, his trembling fingers hardly capable of holding it safe. But at those mock-reproachful words from Tucker's lips, he rallied enough to say:

"Don't—it's all a mistake! Harlow Crampton would not steal a pin, let alone such a sum—"

"Steady, pardner!" warningly cut in Harper, but even as the words passed his lips, he knew that it came too late.

He saw in both faces that Tucker and Crampton knew, just as surely as he or Hastings knew, what that package contained. His frown deepened, but Hastings lightened it a bit by turning to say:

"It's all right, dear friend. We can trust both of these gentlemen from start to finish."

"How's that for a pickpocket, pardner?" maliciously whispered Ran Tucker, unable to resist the temptation to give his recent captor a sly dig in the ribs. "Must I keep my hands up, still?"

"Ask Hastings. He's running the machine, just now."

Grip-sack Sid spoke in an indifferent tone, falling back until he could lean against the wall. Matters were taking a turn which he by no means approved of, with so much at stake; but, as he said, Hastings was running matters, and he ought to know best.

By this time Uncle Harlow had in a measure recovered his wind, so severely tested by his race against time, and of his own accord he began to explain how the valuable packet came into his possession.

"Ef you'd axed me that fust off, I don't reckon I could 'a' told ye. Fer 'twasn't until I'd fetched 'most up hyar that I ketched onto the right of how to do it my own self!" he began.

He told how, in accordance with his usual habit, he rose early and started for the Mint Drop, to get his "morning bitters" before breakfast. He heard the row break forth, consequent upon the assault of Jonah Rice on the stranger whom he mistook for the Blue Chameleon.

Ran Tucker begged him look after Evan Morris, who seemed to be seriously injured in some way; in the fight, as he fancied at the time. He set about this, and while dragging the young man further away from the crowd, he noticed something fall to the ground. This he caught up and thrust into his own pocket, thinking, if he could be said to have thought at all, in his natural excitement, that it had fallen from his inside pocket as he stooped over Morris.

Then Ran Tucker begged him to "stand off" Rice and his gang, while he took Morris home and brought back Hastings and such other law-abiding citizens as he could muster, to prevent a lynching.

"An' then that pesky blue critter come whoopin' into the circus, makin' it all the more bindin', ye want to know. An' I, like any other dug-gun fool fer the lack o' sense—I hed to j'ine in, lickety-split an' bu'st my b'iler! An' I was hot when we started, an' I knowed I'd keep on a-heatin' the fuder we went. An' so I shed my coat an' give it a toss to my woman as we cut past my shanty, ye see. An' thar it was! An' me knowin' no more that I was a rampin' thief my own mis'able self, then nothin'! Good Lawd! Ef my legs was soople 'nough, I'd hire out fer a cent a week to kick my own self!"

"You were not to blame, Crampton, and we owe you solid thanks in place of permitting you to reproach yourself," said Hastings, his unsteady tones betraying how seriously his nerves had been overtaken of late.

"How did you happen to discover your mistake, Mr. Crampton?" Grip-sack Sid asked, speaking smoothly, though a close observer might have seen that he was not nearly so well pleased as his face tried to make out.

"'Twasn't me, so much as 'twas the woman," with an uneasy shifting on the stair, as though his seat had suddenly grown too warm for comfort. "She lit into me the fust thing when I come into the house. An' thar was my ole coat in the one hand of her, an' the package in the other."

"Not open?"

"N-o-o," hesitatingly drawled Crampton, then blurring out the unwelcome truth: "Not jest to say open, then, but it hed bin! An' the woman wanted to know whar an' how on airth I'd made sech a raise?"

"Did you tell her who the money belonged to?"

"Didn't tell her nary word. Jest grabbed the hull doin's, an' sot out fer hyar as quick's I knowed how!"

"Then no one but your own wife knows about the money?"

"Waal," desperately, yet shame-faced. "Thar was two wimmen-folk in the room with her, an' ef you was ever a married man, you ought know what that means!"

"Who were the ladies?"

"One was Mrs. Cooper, the other was Pauline Mohr, Adolph's gal!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CALL AT THE SINGED CAT.

UNCLE HARLOW looked almost as guilty as he could have done had he really been caught trying to steal money from an old friend, instead of having been the means of saving a heavy sum for him. But he knew, as well as any man in Solid City could know, how all-important it was to keep that dangerous secret from spreading.

Grip-sack Sid betrayed no particular amount of uneasiness or of disgust, though his heart was full to overflowing with both sentiments.

"May I have a word with you in private, Mr. Hastings?" he quietly asked, slipping a hand through the arm of the host, leading him into the side room, used by Hastings as an office and private retreat.

He closed the door behind them, then gently pushing Hastings into a seat, he stood close in front him while talking.

"Who is the Pauline Mohr, gal of Adolph, mentioned by Crampton?"

"Just what he said. Oh, you mean—"

"Has Adolph anything to do with the Singed Cat Mine?"

"He is one of the partners. The eldest."

"I had an idea that would be about the sum of it, from the look in Crampton's eyes!" frowned the Grip-sack Sharp. "It would be bad enough to let any woman get hold of the story, but his daughter! Do you know what that amounts to, Mr. Hastings?"

"I suppose she'll hasten to tell her father and his partner."

"When did you say the money had to be paid?"

"On the 15th, between the hours of two and four, in the afternoon."

"And you offered them the money, in advance of the date set?"

"Yes. They refused to touch it. Then—I was robbed of the amount before I could reach home!"

"So Evan told me. Which was just what they hoped for, even if they didn't help matters along a bit!"

"You don't mean—"

"I mean that the Singed Cat pards have more interest in keeping you out of possession than any one else possibly can have. Well, there is only one course left open to you, the way matters have turned out. You must take this money, and again offer it to the pards. If necessary, offer to add a bonus. Make them say how much they will take to give you immediate possession."

"And if they refuse to hasten the hour for payment?"

"Then we'll see if we can't find honest men enough in Solid City to guard \$20,000 for two days longer. By rights the mine should be in your possession now; you've paid the full amount agreed upon."

Hastings looked more deeply troubled than ever, but Grip-sack Sid, thanks to his being a member of the same Order, and to his services rendered Evan Morris when, without his aid, the young man would almost certainly have lost his life, had already gained a strong influence over the mine-owner, whose nerves were rapidly breaking down under that steady, killing strain imposed upon them.

Harper questioned Hastings a little about the two men left in the hall, and finding that his host was willing to warrant them good men and true, he suggested that they be called to give advice as well.

This was done, and when the situation was fully explained to them, both Crampton and Tucker promptly agreed with Harper. Since Pauline Mohr had seen the packet of notes opened and counted, and just as certainly had gathered an account of Evan's home-coming, she would, even if wholly innocent of evil, naturally make all haste to carry the news to her father and his partner at the Singed Cat Mine.

And so, after discussing the chances for and against, it was agreed to make a business trip to the mine, that same afternoon, on the chance that the pards might be induced to end the trouble by accepting the final payment and signing the last papers.

By the time this agreement was reached it was nearly noon, and as none of the men had eaten a regular breakfast, Hastings prevailed on them all to remain and dine with him.

Harper, thanks to his being of nearly the same size and height as Hastings, was enabled to make himself a little more presentable than when he first came under the eyes of Ida Fenwick. And she, having learned from Evan how faithfully the stranger had befriended him in his need, quickly made the traveling man feel quite at home.

After dinner Grip-sack Sid made a brief call on Morris, who was already beginning to feel more his own self under the gentle ministrations of two such admirable nurses. He told him what had been decided upon, and Ida caught the words, having entered the room so silently that for a little time neither of the men suspected her presence.

Conrad Hastings was not a little astonished when all was ready for the ride over to the Singed Cat Mine, to find Ida, in an improvised habit, ready to mount the horse which Grip-sack Sid was leading from the stables back of the house.

"I'm going, papa," the maiden said, with an imperious little nod, her blue eyes glowing with resolution. "Maybe I'll be of more service than hindrance. At least, you men can't well come to blows as long as there is a lady to act the part of peacemaker."

"I believe it's for the best, sir," hurriedly whispered Harper, after aiding Miss Fenwick to mount. "We talked it over up-stairs, with Evan. Don't object. Wait. Tell you just why, later!"

Uncle Harlow and Ran Tucker had gone after their horses, and now were in waiting, accompanied by Billy Trigger, who shrewdly scented what was in the air, and who certainly proved a good man to act as treasure-guard.

There was no use in trying to keep secret the arrival of the money, after the discovery made by Mrs. Crampton and her guests. Though a better-hearted woman never lived, she must talk! And long before this hour, no doubt, half of Solid City knew all about the \$20,000.

The ride was not long enough to prove wearisome, though Ran Tucker and Sidney Harper were about the only ones who even tried to be jolly.

Hastings and Ida were too anxious. Crampton was too greatly mortified at what had happened through himself and wife, to feel like either making or enjoying idle chatter, while Billy Trego felt abashed at finding himself in such "tony" company, off his box.

There was not much to see, even when the mine was reached. Near the gloomy-looking opening which led to the hidden treasure stood a rude cabin, built for the most part of rocks taken from the hillside, and in which the partners lived, while Pauline Mohr "kept house" for them.

Grip-sack Sid and Ida interchanged a swift look as they caught sight of a plump, comely figure standing in the open doorway, and though

they had never before seen Pauline Mohr—as Pauline Mohr, at least—they instinctively recognized the handsome German girl.

Seemingly recognizing some of the party, Pauline uttered a clear, musical call, which was promptly answered by the appearance of two men, clad in rough digger costume, coming from near the mouth of the mine.

One of these, the younger and better looking, leaned carelessly against the cabin, close to where Pauline stood in the door, both smiling, though after a disagreeable fashion. The other, broad-shouldered and sluggish in his movements, with a curious blood-red scar in the center of his forehead, advanced to meet the party on horseback, greeting them with a gruff, sulky growl.

Hastings spoke pleasantly, and was in no haste to open negotiations, but Ida sprang lightly from her saddle, gathering up her skirts so as not to impede her walking, then making her way to the cabin, smilingly begging a drink of water, and permission to sit down in the shade.

With a stiff little nod in answer to her gracious bow, Paul Pickett slouched away toward the men, leaving the two women together.

Conrad Hastings offered to make the last payment on the mine at once, offering any reasonable bonus for the favor, explaining his anxiety with a fair degree of probability by stating that other important business demanded his attention out of Solid City.

Adolph Mohr made no hasty reply, but fumbled in his bosom until he found what he wanted. Then pointing to the words and figures in the paper, he said, doggedly:

"You vhas wrote dem down. I zay, all righd. Isdick me dose bargains by, und you vhas no pedder as me—nein?"

All arguments were wasted. He had given his answer, and stood in stolid silence, slowly puffing away at his pipe.

Nor was Pickett any more accommodating, though he couched his refusal in smoother speech. Hastings had himself drawn up the papers, and they would abide by the conditions laid down in them. If the cash was offered between the hours of two and four, on the 15th, they would sign the papers and turn over the mine. Until then—no!

Ran Tucker and Billy Trego wanted to try threats, but Harper and Hastings refused their aid in that line. Knowing now just what they had to expect, they summoned Ida from the cabin, and started on their homeward trip.

Grip-sack Sid noted the peculiar glow in Ida's eyes, and at a covert signal from her hand, he managed to draw apart from the rest of the company, to catch her excited whisper:

"I was right! Pauline Mohr is Lieutenant Lizard!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

GRIP-SACK SID made no reply to that declaration, so important if true, for he was a man who knew how to make his eyes take the place of a tongue when open speech seemed dangerous or impolitic.

"Of course you have made no mistake. But say no more until we have reached home. Open air talk may be dangerous."

All this his quick glance said, and Ida Fenwick read his advice just as surely as though he had put it into ordinary speech.

One of less keen wit might have misunderstood his full meaning, but not so she. This gray-eyed stranger, who was no longer a stranger, meant no slur against any one of the present company. Only—with so much at stake, even the birds of the air were to be looked upon with doubt, if not actual suspicion.

And so, with a barely perceptible nod of understanding, the maiden pricked up her steed and rejoined her father, who rode at the head of the little cavalcade, his very manner of breathing expressive of defeat.

Grip-sack Sid seemed content, even though deserted by the beauty. He jogged along in the rear, softly whistling a bar from some forgotten song, his lids nearly closed, his muscles relaxed, his appearance that of a man who is catching what repose is possible for a tired man to catch in a saddle.

Outwardly he looked indolent, even lazy, but for all that his brain was busy as it had been at any time since he first became mixed up in this peculiar affair.

"A true woman, all over—bless her as the representative of the dear sex!" was flashing through his brain just when he seemed nearest to falling asleep in the saddle. "Would die at the fiery stake sooner than commit a crime, yet gaze into your eyes with the innocent candor of a baby while deliberately committing perjury! For why? Just because she can't bring her sweet self to ever think she had made a mistake of judgment!"

For, while his gray eyes were telegraphing that warning to Ida Fenwick, they were performing another duty at the bidding of their master; and this was the final decision.

Miss Fenwick positively identified Pauline Mohr as Lieutenant Lizard: with her tongue. All the more positively because back of her innocent blue eyes lurked a serious doubt.

Ran Tucker did his best to brighten up that

homeward ride, but with poor success. Each one of the party felt seriously depressed by the result of their mission, save Grip-sack Sid; and he was too sleepy to be interested in jest or idle chaff.

There came a change when their ride was ended by arrival at the house, and those few miles of sleepy swaying to and fro in his saddle actually seemed to have made a new man of the commercial traveler.

He interchanged a few words in low tones with Conrad Hastings, and receiving his permission to act as his cooler judgment thought wisest, Grip-sack Sid bid his host secure Crampton, taking on himself the management of the other two men.

"Of course you understand that money is no particular object," he said, in substance, to one after the other, while the animals were being relieved of equipage and placed in the stable. "Whatever you are out will be replaced, as a matter of course; and I know that the old gentleman would feel easier about it if you would accept a neat sum for your time."

"All of which comes to—what?" softly interrupted Tucker.

"A request for your services for the next forty-eight hours, more or less," was the quick response.

"All I ax is what I'll hev to pay my sub. fer takin' my place on the box," eagerly spluttered Billy Trigger. "Fer me—waal, I'll take it out in fun, ef they's any trottin' 'round loose!"

"And I'll take mine in showing Mr. Harper that a man need not be a pickpocket, even if he is a sport, a gambler, or—even a road-agent!" laughed Tucker, but with a glow of earnestness in his blue eyes which Grip-sack Sid was quick to recognize and honor at its true worth.

He made no reply, in words, but while his grip seemed the same as the trio joined hands, there was double the feeling thrilling through the fingers that pressed the gambler's hand. It was a silent apology, and from that moment Tucker and himself were true friends.

When they left the stable and entered the house, they found that Hastings and Crampton had also come to an amicable agreement.

"Why wouldn't I?" with meek fire asked Uncle Harlow, letting go of the lip which he had bitten until it glowed as red and ripe as that of a healthy school-girl. "Didn't it all come o' the blame' thick head o' me? Ef I hedn't made sech a crazy fool o' my own self, couldn't we 'a' kep' the money secret ontel the very hour come fer payin' of it over?"

"Only for you we might never have touched the money again, rather! Some one else would have picked the packet up, and though Solid City is no worse than any other place of its size, there are many men here who'd never ask an owner for such an amount of money."

"It'd proved mighty tempting to me, for one," laughed Tucker. "Just think how much good a man of my size and make-up might work with a boodle like that to back me! Why, I'd start on a religious crusade through the mines, and never give a let-up until there wasn't a bank running from one end of the line to the other! Then—well, if it wouldn't cause too severe a strain on the tired man—weary through long laboring for the good of mankind in general and one in particular—maybe I'd ask if any one had dropped a golden nest-egg anywhere in the neighborhood of the spot where I picked up my good luck!"

No one cared to cut his voluble speech short, for all had plenty of material for thought, and Rar Tucker was a privileged character by this time, even among his new acquaintances.

For Ida Hastings had slipped into the room where the men had gathered for consultation, and she, like Harper, had never met this blue-eyed sport before that morning.

Ida had paid Evan Morris a brief visit, immediately after reaching the house, and having found him doing even better than might have been expected considering all he had undergone, of late, she lingered only long enough to tell him how their offer of the cash had been refused, then hastened to change her dress for one more suitable for house wear.

As she entered the room, her eyes at once sought those of Grip-sack Sid, whose glance silently bade her await his signal. And with a degree of trust which even her step-father had seldom obtained from her high spirit, Ida accepted that silent command, sinking into a seat and silently awaited the end.

As it was well that all parties interested should take hold of the difficult problem without any ugly thoughts holding them back, the first thing was to bring Uncle Harlow around to a fairer view of his involuntary share in the matter.

This was no easy task, for the honest old fellow felt bound in honor to shoulder the shortcomings of his wife, as well as his own; but Harper displayed a delicate tact, joined to a skill in argument possibly taught by the necessities of the profession he had adopted; for what is a drummer lacking the gift of gab?

Then, when the fat member was soothed, in temper, soul and body, the real object of that consultation was taken up, and the opinion of each one present asked in turn.

Billy Trigger was slow to start, but when he had been coaxed into a trot, his fighting spirit led him to a gallop, and only Harper's skillful hand on the reins kept him from running away altogether.

"Make 'em come to tha'r oats!" he sternly cried. "Whar's the use in foolishin' any longer 'ith sech pesky, balkin' critters? Shove the fare at 'em in one han', an' let 'em smell of a gun with t'other! Take your choice, critters, but take one or t'other in a holy jump! That's my idee, gentlemen—an' lady!"

Randolph Tucker also raised his voice for war, though he shaped his sentences a little better than Billy Trigger knew how. He would agree to make the Singed Cat pards fully realize the situation. He would call on them again, and gently insinuate that the quicker they came to Limerick, the better their health was like to prove. For, should another \$20,000 robbery take place in or near Solid City, before the disputed property fairly changed hands, as it had owners long since, by rights, there would be hemp-pulling on the docket; and if pressed, he was just prophet enough to name the candidates for elevation in advance.

Uncle Harlow was a little more moderate than either of those who had ventilated their views, though he also agreed that if anything should happen to that packet of money, lynching would be in order if proof sufficient to convict could be gathered.

"But I don't go any furdern that, at the start. What I reckon we want to do is jest this: stan' guard over the dingbats ontel this time two days, then go in a heap to see the swap finished off. We're five men, not countin' the young lady. Pity ef we can't hold the fort that long, even ag'inst Cap'n Chameleon an' all his gang!"

"I'd like to hear from Miss Fenwick, first," quietly said Grip-sack Sid, as all eyes turned toward him as the next speaker. "It is barely possible that she may have something to offer which will cast a little more light on the subject."

Ida flushed, then turned pale as her eyes met that magnetic gaze. It bade her speak freely, and she obeyed.

She turned back to her strange experience with Captain Chameleon the day before, and then, for the first time in public she explained why she had finally submitted to be searched by Lieutenant Lizard.

"I only yielded after—well," her eyes downcast and a blush rendering her fair face more than ordinarily lovely, if possible. "It was a woman, not a man, who searched me. I can make oath to that effect. And so, being a woman myself, I naturally paid more attention to him—to her, I should say!" with a shy laugh of embarrassment.

"And you think you could recognize him—her, were you to meet again, even though he—she wore garments more appropriate to her sex, and was otherwise without disguise?" asked Grip-sack Sid, purposely making so many slips, for he saw that each one helped to steady the maiden.

"I thought so then: I know so now!" with a positive nod. "It was with that belief I insisted on joining the company to-day, in the ride to the mine over which this unlucky dispute has arisen."

"In plainer words you suspected that Pauline Mohr was the same woman who played the part of Lieutenant Lizard?"

"Yes! And now I am sure of it!"

Grip-sack Sid signed for silence, and the wide-eyed men choked back their amazement at this unlooked-for turn in the situation.

"You recognized her—how?"

Ida flushed, then turned pale. Instead of encouraging her, this man was throwing her into confusion by his dubiting looks: perfectly respectful, of course, yet plainly doubting!

"By her figure, her size, her general appearance. Her voice was different, but then, as I said, that of Lieutenant Lizard was plainly altered as a further disguise: no doubt by carrying something in his mouth."

"I reached about the same conclusion, from what I heard him say," quietly nodded Grip-sack Sid. "And while I am not saying you are wrong in your guess, Miss Fenwick, still I can't help thinking that it is like a Scotch verdict: not proven!"

"I could almost take my oath she is the guilty one!"

"Almost—but not quite," bowed Harper, softening his words with a bland smile. "And in a case so important as this—for road-agents pull hemp when once caught in the act, we ought to remember—even strong suspicion lacks considerable of being proof positive."

"Then, what do you think is our proper method of acting?" asked Conrad Hastings, with the air of a man whose own judgment hangs on the answer to be given.

"A combination of masterly inactivity and good solid work," was the smiling response.

"Clear as mud, and legible as a cryptogram writ in running water!" softly murmured Rar Tucker, his eyes rolling upward in mock ecstasy.

"The best advice I have to offer, all the same. Remember, I've had heap sight more work than sleep for a week or so past!"

CHAPTER XXX.

TRYING AN EXPERIMENT.

ALTHOUGH his words and manner plainly lent an impression that he was trying to evade the main responsibility of deciding on their best course of action, Grip-sack Sid finally agreed with Uncle Harlow on a purely defensive campaign as being the wisest and most likely to win the victory in the end.

This was what his lips said, but those lips did not always tell everything born in that keen, strong, crafty brain above and behind them.

Sidney Harper, while admitting the plausibility of Ida Fenwick's estimate of Pauline Mohr, was secretly thinking of another young woman who just as surely filled all those conditions; and while listening to the arguments which each one of that little council brought forward to maintain his or her belief, he was figuring how he could pay a visit to the Jameson cabin without too plainly betraying his own suspicions.

Not that he doubted any one then present. He knew each and every one was true, and just as eager to win complete success as himself. But it was his own judgment he doubted.

"It's only a guess, at best," he mentally admitted. "I've nothing better than empty suspicion, sharpened by instinct, to go on. Still—I feel as though I'd miss a big point by not going to that cabin."

With such a man, to wish was to win, and by exercising a little diplomacy, and telling a few white lies—no serious task for one who claimed to be a Knight of the Grip!—Harper contrived to leave both house and company without, so far as he could guess, arousing any suspicions in the brains of his new friends.

It was pretty well along in the afternoon when he left Solid City behind him, and it was quite a walk to the ford near which Michael Jameson had pitched his habitation, but despite lateness, distance and fatigue, which now began to make itself disagreeably felt, Grip-sack Sid pressed on at a rapid pace, with a certainty that spoke well for his bump of locality. Though he had never been over the ground but once, in the dark and laboring with a wounded, almost helpless comrade, and though he had not dared ask any questions of those likely to be better posted, he found his way to the ford without the slightest difficulty in keeping the rude trail.

He had no settled plan in mind. He was simply trying an experiment, so to speak. One which, were his suspicions true, might well cost him even more danger than trouble in finding his way to the cabin. But he felt that the end to be won amply justified that risk, and a man who comes armed with strong suspicion, not to mention good pistols, can make a sturdy fight against even the heaviest of odds.

"Good-evening, Miss Norah!" he briskly called out, catching sight of that plump, attractive figure in the open doorway as he passed by the gnarled old tree which had served him such a friendly turn the night last past. "I've come to thank you for your hospitality, and—"

"Sure an' it is, just!" ejaculated Norah, throwing up her hands in glad surprise. "Then you did get safe home, sor? And the young gentleman—Mr. Morris, poor la?"

"Perfectly happy, save for wishing that he might have another meal that could taste as sweet as the one you furnished us last night. It makes even my lips water, merely to think—Good-evening, sir!"

Grip-sack Sid was at the threshold, and recognizing the figure of a man seated near the fireplace, he sent that salutation in advance.

"The same to you, sor! It's hoighly de-loighted Oi am to—divil fly away wid the pinchin', now!" breaking off with a poorly checked groan of pain as he sunk back into his chair, while Norah hastened to explain:

"Sure, sor, 'tis the same ould bother that's caught him the night just gone, an' he's kilt intirely wid the rheumaticks. Aisy, daddy, darlint!" her mellow tones growing softer and soothing, as though she were addressing a fretful child. "Don't try to rise—the kind gentleman will be afther ixcusin' the impoliteness av yer not—"

"I beg of you not to stir, dear sir," cried Grip-sack Sid, crossing the threshold and gently laying a hand on the old man's shoulder. "I could never forgive myself were I to cause you one additional pang, for I know what rheumatism is, through painful experience. I've had it my own self, for many a long month at a stretch."

"It's not much stretchin' wid me, sure," grimly laughed Jameson over his shoulder. "Will ye be plased to sit down, sor? Norah, bring the gentleman a chair. An' ye're the same gentleman Nora was tellin' me of, ownly lasht noight that iver was? The wan that—be s'ated, sor! It's poorly we're fixed for intertainin' company, sure, but—"

"I beg of you, my dear sir!" imploringly interrupted Grip-sack Sid, with his face full of pain—or its perfect counterfeit. "Not a word against this palace—for palace it seemed, last night, when we came to the door, weak, wound-

ed and weary! A palace of plenty, too! Never in all my life did I taste food that came so near making me feel like an angel, as I received from the fair hands of your fairer daughter!"

"Ye're too kind, sor, intoirely! Norah!"

"Daddy, darlint?"

"Be afther settin' the table, will ye? The gintleman—"

"No, no, I beg of you!" hastily protested Grip-sack Sid, hardly able to choke back his laughter at having his extravagant words so literally taken—and rewarded. "I wouldn't trouble you for the world!"

"Divil a throuble is it a throuble at ahl, at ahl, sor!" earnestly declared Michael Jameson. "It's an honor, sor, and av ye'll plase an ould cripple—ow-wow!"

"Daddy, darlint!" cried Norah, her voice, deep and mellow, sounding as though it was floating in tears. "Av I could ownly help ye, honey!"

"Ye kin, Norah! Hilp me by sayin' divil fly away wid the wan that invinted rheumatics—amin!"

"Divil fly away wid him—Mary, Mother, forgive me av it's a sin! Sure, my own daddy towld me!" she murmured, falling back with face suffused in blushes before that keen, half-quizzical gaze.

"And I'll share your burden, if sin there be, Miss Norah," nodded Grip-sack Sid, raving out a much more vigorous oath as his share.

Thus the ice was broken most effectually, and to judge from outward seeming alone, Grip-sack Sid never met with more congenial company than this. And Michael Jameson, barring an occasional groan or growl at his hereditary enemy, seemed equally delighted with this smooth-tongued stranger. And Norah? She busied herself in spreading the table and loading it with eatables, not forgetting a little black jug, at the appearance of which Michael audibly smacked his lips, then craned his neck to bring his lips nearer the ear of his guest, whispering:

"Sure, sor, it's *that same* I wor afther lasht noight whin ye wor here—bad luck to the missin' av ye!"

"I'm the one who ought to regret the fact, sir, not you," bowed Harper, keeping up his end most admirably.

He showed no reluctance at accepting their hospitality, though he was watching every movement, noting every word spoken or glance interchanged. If they were honest, this could bring them no harm. If guilty they deserved no better.

He was hungry enough to do ample justice to the food placed before him, but he drew the line at aught from the little brown jug. In the first place because, naturally, Jameson poured out a glass for his honored guest to drink first. Then, to be consistent, after seeing his host drink freely, and even Norah touch her red lips to the glass, he still refused, declaring that though his heart was entirely willing, his constitution would not stand it at all.

"It was bred in me, I reckon," he said, mournfully. "One swallow would put my clothes on the wrong side of me; by turning me wrong side out! And this supper is entirely too delicious to lose!"

Grip-sack Sid did what he could to make that meal an interesting one, by giving a tolerably exact account of how they had been held up by Captain Chameleon after leaving the cabin. And all the while keenly though covertly watching the faces of the hosts, he told how he had foiled the road-agents by leaving the packets of money in the old tree.

"An' it's back ye kem for it the afthernoon, sor?" spluttered old Jameson, who had listened through all with staring eyes and open lips.

"No," coolly added Grip-sack Sid. "I made the trip last night, and we managed to get the money safe to town and in Hastings's hands. I believe he rode over to pay it to the Singed Cat pards, to have the business settled without more bother."

"Well, well, the wonder of it ahl! An' nayther av us so much as suspecting annything the long noight t'rough!"

The hospitable beings would fain have kept their guest all night, or a month, for that matter, simply to dwell upon that truly marvelous series of adventures; but it was already growing dusk, and Harper did not care to be caught by darkness too near the scene of Captain Chameleon's operations. So, amid many warm invitations to call again, he finally tore himself away, Jameson hobbling, with a cane and Norah to help, as far as the edge of the ford with him.

"Yes or no? Norah or Pauline?" Grip-sack Sid asked himself as he hurried away after a parting wave of his hand to the couple at the ford. "One is surely Lieutenant Lizard, but—which one?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE YELLOW CHAMELEON.

THAT was the question, and Grip-sack Sid would have felt willing to pay a heavy price for an authorized answer.

Although he had little better than a certain instinct to guide him, aided by one or two

points which might very readily be explained away without in the slightest degree reflecting on the honesty of the Jamesons, father and daughter, he had settled on that couple as Captain Chameleon and Lieutenant Lizard.

Until after his little confidential talk with Ida Fenwick, which ended in her winning him over to her fancy for joining the party then being made to call at the Singed Cat Mine.

Miss Fenwick declared positively that she recognized in Pauline Mohr the second in command of the road-agents. And her eyes admitted that she found room for doubt, after all her positive words.

This doubt, which one would naturally suppose enough to strengthen Harper in his original belief, actually led him to doubt his first judgment, as well. And so, with the express purpose of mentally comparing Norah with Pauline, while the memory of the latter was still fresh in his mind, he ignored his fatigue and made that rough trip.

"What have I gained by it?" he asked himself, while making the best of his way back to Solid City. "Not enough to boast of, that's certain!"

While keeping his eyes and ears on the keen alert, his weapons ready for quick service in case of need, Grip-sack Sid mentally reviewed the evidence for and against both parties.

Pauline, through her father and his partner, would have the greatest inducement to take part in such a hazardous scheme, so far as the blows were dealt against Conrad Hastings. Not only was the money quite sufficient to tempt the covetous, but if it could be thus won, Hastings might not be able to replace it in time to complete the purchase of the Singed Cat Mine. And unless Evan Morris had made a serious mistake, that new discovery had rendered the property ten-fold more valuable than it had been when the contract was first drawn up.

"And they would naturally want to keep the matter confined to as small a number as possible, which would account for Miss Pauline taking a hand in the game."

The money argument applied quite as forcibly to the Jamesons, and if they were really the head of the robber band, the shooting and robbing of Adolph Mohr could be accounted for with more ease.

Was it simply Irish hospitality that made Norah try so hard to win them into remaining all night beneath that roof? Was it native politeness that kept her from mentioning, or even noticing the unusual garb worn by Evan Morris? Was it merely chance that led to their being found by Captain Chameleon, so soon after leaving that cabin?

"If so, how did Jameson get back home without our hearing or seeing anything of him? And if he caught the rheumatism last night, why didn't he show some signs of it when I stole back after the money and took a sly peep through the window?"

"And—why should the charming Norah talk with hair on her pretty white teeth this evening, while she had only the least taste in life of the brogue last night?"

After this fashion, Grip-sack Sid pelted himself with questions almost all the way to Solid City, while at the same time keeping a wary look out for Captain Chameleon, red, yellow or black.

He reached town without any adventure, rather to his surprise. He had been kept so busy of late, that he felt almost at a loss to recognize himself in such a peaceful role. But of all these queries, he had not solved even one, with perfect satisfaction to himself.

"I'd feel like hiring a cheap hand to boot me over the quarter-section, only for one thing," he said, with a yawn that threatened to split his jaws wide open. "If they really are my ducks, I've given them another quarter to look to: they can't know that the Singed Cat pards refused the money again, and before they can find that out, I'll get in a few hours solid sleep, anyway!"

By the time he had gained the building, Grip-sack Sid had decided not to mention his visit to the Jameson cabin, partly because he felt too nearly worn out to enter into any elaborate discussion or explanation until after he had secured some greatly needed rest; but mainly because he wished more time for weighing the evidence against Michael and Norah before he brought their names into the game.

Sidney Harper found supper awaiting his return, but that fact did not seriously endanger his secret. Strong, healthy, able to eat as he worked, Grip-sack Sid manfully played his part as a trencher-knight, then joined Hastings and Crampton in the little office, over a cigar.

Neither Randolph Tucker nor Billy Trego were present, though Mr. Hastings gave them full credit for volunteering to guard the house through the night, on the rather slender chance that Captain Chameleon might attempt to retrieve his bad luck in missing the prize just when it had been fairly within his grasp.

"But I didn't believe that was necessary. And they had both of them been up all, or nearly all, of last night, with very little rest to-day. So I bade them go catch up with their sleep, and we'd be all the better prepared for work in the morning."

Grip-sack Sid listened in silence, giving a nod of approval at the end.

"Of course it is only right that we should use all necessary precautions, but I really don't believe there is anything to fear for to-night. For one thing, if Captain Chameleon is simply a road-agent, he can hardly have learned for sure that the money reached you, in time to prepare for another raid so soon as this. And if, on the other hand, it is some one who has a strong interest in hindering you from completing the payment for the Singed Cat Mine, he or they would rather time the stroke so as to leave you as little time in which to recover as possible. And by having only part of one day in which to work, you would have just so much less chance of hitting on the track of the actual thief. See?"

All this sounded very plausible, and at least it had one merit: Conrad Hastings felt much more at ease than he had at any time since the refusal of the final payment by Mohr & Pickett.

Harlow Crampton insisted on spending the night on guard over the treasure which he felt had been endangered through his folly—for he was a true husband, in that he counted himself and his wife as one, particularly where blame could be attributed to her curiosity and love of gossip—but Hastings would not listen to that.

"I've locked the money in a little tin box, and given the key to Evan, the box to Ida, bidding them secrete both articles without letting each other, or even me, know where they are concealed. My safe stands yonder, open to inspection. But if you advise to the contrary, I can lock it," with a look of inquiry toward Harper.

"That depends on what you leave inside of it, seems to me," smiled the Grip-sack Sharp. "As for your arrangement about the \$20,000, I hardly see how you could better that. If a raid was made, the robbers would have to muster about all of the family; and what would we be doing, meantime?"

Where all minds are inclined one way, and all tongues are willing to argue on the same side, an agreement is readily reached, and by the time a cigar each had been turned into smoke and ashes, Harlow Crampton was ready to make his way homeward, to "rub down" his expected-to-be uneasy wife, and Grip-sack Sid was yawning in anticipation of a long night's repose.

He hardly wasted time to remove his borrowed suit, and was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the fragrant pillow.

Not so Conrad Hastings. Sleep refused to visit him, and knowing as much, he made no serious effort to woo the coy god. And as the night grew older; when Evan had settled into a profound slumber that would do more for his hurts than all the doctors in the land; when Mrs. Morris had fallen asleep on the couch near the bedside of her son, and Ida had retired to her own chamber, there to dream of Captain Chameleon and Lieutenant Lizard and—of her cousin! Conrad Hastings was down in his office, lost in thought, but still awake.

To record his musings would be to repeat in ampler detail the history of the Singed Cat Mine, and all the complications that deal had given rise to.

Then—without a sound to alarm the man half-buried in the easy-chair, the door leading into the hall opened, inch by inch, until far enough ajar to admit a closely clad figure, in whose left hand glittered a heavy knife, over whose right arm hung a folded cloth.

Without a sound, still as a shadow cast by the full moon without, this intruder stole up behind the unsuspecting man, and when close enough to make sure work, he clinched the knife between his teeth, taking with it a bit of the mask that shielded his face, then flung the heavy cloth over Hastings's head, twisting it deftly, so tightly as to completely drown the involuntary cry which rose in his throat.

Working like one who had often taken a hand in such risky matters, the intruder quickly bound and gagged Conrad Hastings, leaving him a silent, motionless, blinded captive while he hastily ransacked the safe standing in the corner.

From head to foot the intruder was clad in yellow; the material showing under the lighted lamp, just as Evan Morris had described the garb worn by the being who had attempted to rob and kill him, back in the hills, "yellow as gold itself."

Only the white, polished steel gripped between his teeth, and the brace of revolvers at his waist, relieved the golden hue.

The dress was a perfect imitation of the one worn by Captain Chameleon while "holding up" the Centropolis stage, save in color: cap, mask, feather, body covering and breeches.

Failing to discover what he wished in the safe, the Yellow Chameleon gave a low snarl of disappointment, turning toward his captive and taking the bared blade in his hand as though about to redder it with a tinge more appropriate to "the crimson cavalier."

Instead, he passed by, turning the key gently in the door leading into the hall, then crossing the room to make sure the window opposite was in working condition.

This done, the Yellow Chameleon removed the

blinder from his victim's head and eyes, staring into his flushed face with an evil glow streaming through the holes in his mask as he hissed:

"Where have you hidden that \$20,000, Conrad Hastings?"

A shake of the head, and a faint gurgling sound seemed to bring a realization of the folly of asking a gagged man aught requiring an answer in words, and as he pressed the keen point of his knife against the throat of the helpless mine-owner, Captain Chameleon added in the same low, yet penetrating whisper:

"Remember! I'll slit your throat at the first sound of coming help! I'll ask you a question or two, which you can answer by simply closing your eyes for no, and winking twice for yes. Now—is the \$20,000 in this house?"

Hastings quickly closed his eyes, holding the lids down until there could be no mistake as to his meaning.

The Yellow Chameleon gave a fierce snarl at that reply, and the point of his blade pressed hard enough to draw a drop or two of blood.

"You are lying, ye devil! Tell me where you have hidden the money, or I'll slit your throat from ear to ear! I know that the money reached you in safety. I know that you tried to get the Singed Cat pards to take it, but they refused. I know that you brought the money back with you, and now—"

A low, measured tapping on the closed window cut his savage speech short, and with a catlike leap, the Yellow Chameleon crossed the room to lift the sash, blowing out the light as he passed by the table.

A few low, hurried words came to him from one without the building, and as though warned of coming peril, the Yellow Chameleon returned to the chair in which Conrad Hastings was sitting, picking him up and carrying him to the window with as much seeming ease as though the burden weighed no more than an infant. He thrust the bound man through the opening, feet foremost, where another dark figure received him. Then the Yellow Chameleon followed, closing the window after himself.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A GLOVE AND A NOTE.

THE hours stole along, and nothing broke the slumbers of those above stairs until another day had fairly dawned.

Ida Fenwick was the first one stirring who felt anything like alarm, and that came from her delight over the rapid improvement visible in Evan Morris. Not on her cousin's account, of course, but with such glad tidings to communicate, it was natural enough for her to turn toward her father as the proper one to fully sympathize with her joy.

As she had heard nothing of him moving about the house, and as Mrs. Morris said he had not called at the door of the sick-room, Ida went to his chamber, rapping merrily at his door. No response coming to a second rap, she opened the door and peered inside.

To give a little start of wonder, not unmixed with uneasiness as she noticed the smooth, unruffled appearance of the bed. It certainly had not been slept in that night.

Still she was not exactly frightened. They had been so long apart that her step-father and his habits were almost unknown to her. He might be in the habit of sleeping elsewhere, on occasions.

She descended the stairs, to find no signs of him, save it might be in the fact that the door of his office was locked. Then she enlisted the aid of Mrs. Morris, who quickly decided that neither of the hats belonging to Mr. Hastings were missing, consequently it was hardly probable that he had left the house for a stroll, or on business.

They tried the door, but it resisted their efforts. They went outside, to peer in at the one window; but the inner curtain was lowered, and once more they were foiled.

Then, obeying the impulse which she had until now resisted, simply because she knew in her heart of hearts that she was fast learning to love her cousin—or, rather, that the old-time love was rekindling—Ida rushed up-stairs to the sick-chamber, telling Evan her fears.

"Go knock at Harper's door!" the young man cried, his own face betraying strong doubts, almost fears.

Ida obeyed, and Grip-sack Sid was not long in dressing himself! But rapidly as he responded to that excited summons, Evan Morris was at the head of the stairs before him, fully dressed, looking very pale and haggard, but still able to do and dare in case of need.

A few hurried words told Grip-sack Sid what was feared, and in the same hasty tones he cautioned Morris against too openly betraying his real uneasiness, should investigation show the master of the house had really vanished.

"Follow any lead I may give, and we'll be all the better able to work and get at the whole truth," he added, just in time to escape being overheard by Ida.

The door was forced, when it was found that no milder method would serve, and almost instantly Grip-sack Sid caught sight of a dull red blotch on the table, over which his hand drop-

ped; to lift again, taking with it the tell-tale article!

Crossing the room, he quickly raised the shade, letting in a clearer flood of light, just in time to see Evan Morris use his feet to push what looked like a common grain-sack, under a chair.

Their eyes met, and then those of Morris dropped to Harper's closed hand, telling as plainly, as words might have done, that he had noted that neat act of palming, and, as directed, had "followed suit" with the blinder which had performed its parts in the capture of Conrad Hastings.

They both were fairly well satisfied that Hastings had come to grief, though they could only give a guess as to the means employed. But their first care was for the already frightened women, and they did all they could to soothe their fears.

"I reckon maybe Mr. Hastings has gone over to have an early talk with Uncle Harlow," said Grip-sack Sid, quietly. "I believe there was something said about it last night, but I was so awfully sleepy that I didn't pay particular attention."

"But neither of his hats are gone!" said Mrs. Morris.

"Maybe he forgot to take one," laughed Harper, lightly. "Anyway, he surely must be all right. No one could run away with him against his will, without kicking up a racket loud enough to rowse some of us. So—while you see about getting breakfast, Mrs. Morris, I'll just take a stroll over to town, and look him up."

Grip-sack Sid donned his hat, leaving the house, Morris keeping him company to the gate, where he hurriedly asked:

"What was it you found on the table, Harper?"

Grip-sack Sid drew from his pocket a crumpled glove of crimson silk! Just such a glove as Ida had described Captain Chameleon wearing while holding up the Centropolis stage!

"That devil! He's carried off Uncle Con!" gasped Evan, staring at the red glove as he might at proof positive of foul murder.

"Some one has, I reckon, but—was it the genuine Captain Chameleon? The same one who originally took to wearing such dainty gloves?"

"You found it in that room!"

"Which is precisely why I doubt," with a fleeting smile. "Captain Chameleon has proved himself an audacious knave, I grant you, but would he be such a fool as to leave his card behind him, like this?"

"But if he means to hold Uncle Con for ransom?"

"If that, he would have left something more explicit. I don't believe the Original Jacobs has anything to do with this vanishment. I believe that those who accomplished as much, wanted to turn our suspicions in that direction, though. And why? Well, what's the matter with keeping us on a false scent until to-morrow afternoon is wasted? Until it is too late to complete the purchase of that mine?"

"You think the Singed Cat pards have done this foul deed?"

"It looks that way, to me; but thinking is not proof, remember. And proof is what we've got to have!"

Morris, beginning to feel faint from the effects of the excitement following his wounds, looked so pale that Grip-sack Sid bade him return to the house, doing what lay in his power to calm the women and allay their fears.

"Don't say anything of this glove, and contrive to get at that rigging you pushed under the chair without their noticing you. Keep as quiet as you can until I get back. I'm going after Tucker and Trego, and may bring back Uncle Harlow, though his coming will surely let the cat out of the bag. Go—I'll think it out as I travel!"

Grip-sack Sid performed his mission more quickly than he anticipated, for he met Ran Tucker and Billy Trigger starting out from the hotel with the intention of paying the Hastings house a visit, to see if all had gone well and inquire when their duties would begin.

With a few words he made known what had taken place, as far as discovered, and the trio started for the house of trouble, to be joined by Uncle Harlow before they had time to avoid him!

Grip-sack Sid accepted the inevitable with a good grace. He knew that Conrad Hastings had been kidnapped by the enemy in some audacious manner. The truth could not long be hidden from the ladies, and the blow would fall no lighter by being delayed a few minutes. Better let them know the worst at once; then suspense would not add to their natural grief.

This was fully decided upon before the house was reached, and as the most intimate friend of the family, Uncle Harlow entered the house direct, Randolph Tucker passed around to inspect the ground under the window, knowing from the fact of the office door being locked on the inside that exit must have taken that course.

Grip-sack Sid was going with the sport, when he caught sight of Evan Morris beckoning to him from the stable, and bidding Billy Trigger go with Tucker, Harper hastened to obey that silent summons.

"What have you discovered?" asked the Grip-

sack Sharp, reaching the door through which Morris had retreated at his coming.

"Look at this horse!" a trembling finger indicating one of the several animals in the stalls. "I found him just as you see: saddle and bridle on, covered with sweat and foam!"

"Looks as though the witches had been using him for a broom-stick, that's a fact!" muttered Harper, drawing closer and soothingly patting the animal.

He gave a start as his sensitive fingers touched the roughened, matted hair, where the moisture had dried in great part. He bent forward until first his nose and then his lips touched the hair, drawing back to spit out what looked like froth.

"Soap! Mighty valuable critter, pardner! Sweets pure soap!"

"I don't understand, but—I found this note pinned to the saddle when I came in!" hastily added Morris, showing a scrap of paper.

Grip-sack Sid caught at it, to quickly read the few words thereon:

"EVAN MORRIS:—

"This is to inform you that Conrad Hastings is in my hands, a hostage for the safe keeping and safe delivery of my \$20,000! If that amount be not delivered to my messenger, whom I shall send to you in a short time, with terms of exchange, you may have the grim satisfaction of mourning over his corpse, but you certainly shall never again see your beloved uncle alive!"

CAPTAIN CHAMELEON."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BLACK CHAMELEON TRIES HIS HAND.

"WHAT do you think, now?" asked Morris, brushing the cool damp from his brow with trembling fingers as he saw by Harper's eyes that he had reached that bold signature.

"I think we were infernal idiots for even battling an eye until after that money was regularly turned into the Singed Cat," growled the Grip-sack Sharp, staring at that scrap of paper much as he might have done at the rascal whose name was appended to it.

"You don't—it can't possibly be a clumsy jest—Tucker?"

Grip-sack Sid gave a start, staring into that haggard face for a single breath like one who finds a difficulty in hearing. But then a curl came to his lip and his head gave a negative shake.

"Don't let your fancy run away with you in that direction, pardner. Tucker has had all the joking he wants, for a week or two to come. As for the other—well, it is clumsy enough, come to simmer it down."

Paying no attention to the questions asked by the young man, Grip-sack passed from one end of the stable to the other, seemingly searching for something, but giving no indications by which his success or failure might be judged, until he came back to the horse which had apparently been ridden so hard and so far.

"Just how clumsy, let me prove to you, pardner," he said, in calm, matter-of-fact tones, his manner anything but that of a man who has done aught to be proud of. "This nag looks as though he had been ridden, tail-on-end, for at least a score of miles. He seems covered over with half-dried sweat and foam. Two lies, to begin with!"

"But—I don't—"

"You shall, if you grant me elbow-room for this bell-clapper of mine, pardner. I never could talk to a customer who would persist in blowing his own horn all the time. So—here you have it!"

"That nag hasn't been out of his stall, or out of the stable, to allow a little leeway, since we put him up after the Singed Cat trip. He hasn't been ridden. He isn't sweaty. That isn't foam. Smell of him, and you'll smell soap. Taste a bit of his matted hair and you'll taste soap. And then, wind up by both looking into and smelling of this horse-bucket!" lifting the utensil named fairly beneath the nostrils of his bewildered companion.

Hardly without knowing it, Morris gave a scent, and unmistakably recognized the smell of common bar-soap. And in the bucket was a little water, having a milky tinge, like that of strong soap-suds!

Grip-sack Sid would say no more until he had Evan both feel and taste of the matted hair, that test driving away the last lingering doubt from the young man's mind. And yet—

"What benefit is this discovery to us? What does it prove?" he asked, helplessly.

"More or less, just according to how it can be fitted in with what remains to be discovered by more extended search. For one thing, it shows that the kidnappers want us to believe Hastings has been carried at least twenty miles from here—less than that wouldn't account for a horse so awfully sweaty and bunged-up. For another, it wants us to sit down and wait in idleness for the coming of that messenger, who is to bring terms and an offer of exchange."

"But if we anger the demon by going against his orders, may he not revenge himself on poor Uncle Con?"

"And so do himself out of the ransom?" half-laughed Harper, only to turn with a start and a flush toward the stable door, where stood Ida Fenwick, pale as death, a look of horror in her big blue eyes.

Instantly Grip-sack Sid divined the truth. Whether intentionally or not, Ida had played eavesdropper long enough to learn the awful truth—that her step-father had fallen into the merciless grip of his deadliest enemies.

Making the best of a bad bargain, though he would far rather have kept those significant discoveries to himself, long enough at least to carefully review and thoroughly analyze them, Sidney Harper called all hands into the little office, and then told everything discovered up to date.

If he laid a little more emphasis on the words written by Captain Chameleon—or signed in that name—than he had while alone with Eva Morris, who shall say that he was not justified?

It faintly comforted the sobbing women, and did not commit him to anything which would serve to hamper his movements.

Acting on a covert hint from Grip-sack Sid, Evan was taken with a sharp attack of faintness, which led to his withdrawal to his chamber, whither he was attended by both mother and cousin, thus leaving the men to hurriedly form their true plans.

Grip-sack Sid at once gave his real interpretation of the "doctored" horse, strongly expressing his belief that if this abduction had actually been carried out by Captain Chameleon, the original, he was directly allied with the Singed Cat pards.

"In fact, I believe that he is one of them! The younger fellow, Paul Pickett!"

"But Adolph Mohr was shot and robbed, and—"

"I said *if*, in great big letters a foot high! But I don't believe this was the work of the Original Jacobs. I don't believe *he* would have wasted so much time—and soap—because he wouldn't have to. But, again, leaving out the red chameleon, there's the man in yellow, who so nearly took Morris in out of the wet!"

"An' that dug-gun blue critter!" nodded Uncle Harlow, eagerly.

"Well, I hardly think *he* had a finger in the pie," smiled Harper, with a covert glance toward Ran Tucker.

Thus the subject was discussed until a decision was arrived at.

Grip-sack Sid was to put in the day, and up to near midnight, over in the Singed Cat vicinity. Tucker was to hunt for sign, in company with Billy Trigger, but the driver was never to go over a mile away from the house. Crampton was to remain at the building, together with Evan and the two ladies.

Unless some important discovery was made, to alter their plans, Harper was to return by midnight to assist in guarding the \$20,000.

For, firm in his belief that Conrad Hastings had been stolen away by the Singed Cat pards, or by their hired tools, Grip-sack Sid felt almost positive that another effort would be made to secure possession of the money by the *real* Captain Chameleon.

That day and evening passed away without anything of particular interest occurring at or near the house of mourning: for such it was, despite the encouragement attempted by Crampton, who asserted that he "felt it in his bones" everything would "pan out according to Gunter!"

The trail-hunters discovered a few marks beneath the office window which might have been left by the kidnapers, but their skill was not sufficient to follow the trail beyond the inclosure.

Thus night settled down, creeping slowly along, and darkness filled every room under that roof. After urgent entreaties both Mrs. Morris and Ida Fenwick retired, each declaring that sleep was entirely out of the question. The three men, armed to the teeth, kept silent watch and ward below stairs, each one ardently hoping—almost praying—for Captain Chameleon to put in an appearance.

And while they were still beguiling the sluggish minutes after this fashion, a dark shape was silently stealing through the grounds and nearing the rear of the building. Another shadow kept near, but then noiselessly drew around to the corner, as though keeping watch, while the first phantom of the night climbed upon the little lean-to at the rear, pausing directly under a closed window.

This barrier gave him little trouble, seemingly, for after a brief space, during which he seemed to be listening fully as much as working, the sash slowly, noiselessly slid up, to be fastened when at its utmost elevation.

Not a sound came from the interior, and after a few moments spent in listening, both within and without, the dark shape quickly left the sloping roof for the level flooring inside.

A touch of his gloved hand opened the slide of a dark lantern which hung over his head, thus leaving both hands at liberty to work in case of need. The shaft of light, slender at first, but then spreading out like a fan, told him all he cared to see, and shutting off the light by covering the glass with one hand, he glided along until he needed another ray.

By alternating this, he soon discovered the chamber in which Ida Fenwick was sleeping, and gently closing the door behind him, he

turned on the light slightly until he was sure of his ground, then gave the light a clear sweep.

Falling full across her face, the glow awakened Ida, who had fallen asleep without removing her clothes. Her lips parted to utter a shriek of alarm, but a heavy palm fell over them, the keen knife-point nearly touched one of her wildly staring eyes, while a low, harsh voice said:

"Silence! One whimper, and you'll not only die, but murder your father as well!"

That title came just in time. If only her own life had been menaced, Ida would hardly have hesitated before struggling desperately to give the alarm, knowing as she did that strong men and true were within easy call, and would lose no time in rushing to her assistance.

But her father!

That dark-lantern, though from its position nearly all the light was cast upon her and the bed, away from this desperado, still cast out glow enough to dimly reveal that shape and its peculiar dress.

Black as the foul heart which was beating beneath that close-fitting garb! The same which Evan had described to her, when telling of the narrow escape that fateful packet of bank-notes had had for the second time, thanks to the foresight of Grip-sack Sid.

The Black Chameleon!

"Death to both father and daughter if you try to raise the alarm, Miss Fenwick," came that low, fierce whisper. "I have *him* safe. I'll take you, too, if I can't do better. But first—*where is that money?*" I'll loosen your lips for a moment, so you can answer, but if you speak above the whisper I've pitched—*out goes your light!*"

He quivered that ugly point close above her eye, lending emphasis to his savage threat.

Waiting just long enough for the maiden to fairly comprehend his meaning, the Black Chameleon lifted his hand as he repeated his question.

"Where is the money hidden? Life if you answer truly—death to father and daughter if you lie!"

"Mercy—spare—" faintly gasped Ida, seemingly overcome with terror. "Over there, in the—"

Entirely deceived by her acting, perfect as it was instantaneously conceived, Captain Chameleon turned his head in the direction indicated by the maiden, who swiftly rolled over and out at the further side of the bed, crying out for help at the top of her voice, and at the same time desperately discharging the revolver which Evan had given her when they parted for the night.

The Black Chameleon gave a savage curse, wheeling to flash his knife downward, but cutting only the harmless bedclothes. Then, as he heard the alarm spreading, while Ida, now fairly under the bed, kept working her revolver, making plenty of sound if she did no particular damage, he fled from the chamber, leaping through the open window, then from the roof of the lean-to to the ground, recoiling with a gasping cry as a dark shape suddenly sprung toward him.

"Don't shoot—'tis I!" came a hurried, guarded voice, and just in time he recognized Lieutenant Lizard.

"Jig's up—run that way—as arranged!" Captain Chameleon swiftly said, then away they sped in headlong flight, clearing the yard just as Ran Tucker came through the window above, hot on the scent.

Although Captain Chameleon, thanks to a backward glance, must have known that he was sighted, he did not change his course, but ran directly on in the trail leading to the Singed Cat Mine. Until—

"Halt! and give an account of yourself!" cried a sharp voice from directly in his path, rising up, pistol in hand.

Swift as thought itself, the Black Chameleon leaped forward and struck hard, the stranger going down before him, like a man of straw.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GRIP-SACK SID ON DECK.

GOOD man though he undoubtedly was, Grip-sack Sid had measured swords with about the toughest customer he ever tackled in all his eventful career as drummer—assumed, or detective—real.

True, he had some faint excuse, this time, for he had only bare suspicion to act upon when he heard that unseen fugitive running so hastily toward him as he was on his way to Hastings's. He had barely time enough to take a single snapshot after uttering his challenge, but at that very instant he fancied that this must be Ran Tucker, or Billy Trigger, coming to hunt for him. Then—

That pantherish leap, that vicious blow with clubbed-pistol, sent him to the ground, half-stunned and wholly astonished.

He staggered to his feet a few seconds later, just in time to be shot at by Ran Tucker, who yelled out savagely:

"Halt! you're my meat, and I'll—"

"It's me—Harper!" hoarsely gasped Grip-sack Sid, his ear tingling with the touch of that well-meant bullet.

"Great Scott! and I thought—what did you

run for?" spluttered Tucker, even more bewildered now than his friend had been a moment before. "What were *you* doing in *her* room? What—"

Grip-sack Sid caught him by both shoulders, giving him a fierce shake to steady his wits, then demanded:

"What's up? Who were you chasing? He didn't get the money?"

"No, but—was I chasing *you*?"

"No. He knocked me down. I thought it might be you. Follow his line, and keep track of the Singed Cat pards! I'll look to this end of the road. Off with you! Catch if you can, but if not, lay low and watch!"

The last words were cast back over his shoulder, for already Grip-sack Sid had shaped his plans, and knew that a single minute lost might mean all the difference between victory and defeat.

Ran Tucker, still in a maze, mechanically obeyed, trying his level best to overtake the fugitive; but Grip-sack Sid hardly gave another thought to him or to aught else in that quarter.

Blood was trickling down his face from a scalp-wound, inflicted by the pistol of Captain Chameleon, though luckily the blow had been a glancing one, and his hat had partially broken its force; but he paid no attention to that. His every thought was bent to the final defeat of his truly "tough customer," leaving room for naught else.

He found the house well lighted up, with Crampton and Morris on guard, Billy Trigger having left in pursuit of one of the marauders, while Tucker had chased the other. He only stopped to learn that the money was safe, and no one had been injured, then ran to the stable and led out the best horse owned by Hastings.

He lost a little time in adjusting saddle and bridle, but he was cool enough to reason that, with such a rough ride before him, he would gain time in the end by having a secure seat. Then, leaping into the saddle, he dashed away, skirting town in order to avoid exciting an alarm which would hinder more than it could help him.

Once fairly clear of the town, Grip-sack Sid sped along the trail over which he had passed on two different occasions before, heading direct for the Jameson cabin.

"Who else *could* it have been?" he mentally asked, calling his utmost skill as a rough rider into play to maintain that killing pace, yet run as little risk of broken bones to horse and rider as might be. "Surely not the Singed Cat pards! I had them safely holed. Neither of them stirred out of the cabin from sunset up to midnight! A mouse couldn't have left those four walls without my seeing it—much less a man of the bigness of the devil who laid me out! So—*who else?*"

So strong was this conviction, that his only fear now was of being beaten to that cabin by its owner, Michael Jameson. If he could reach it first? If Ran Tucker would press the rascal so hard that he could not have made his double immediately after knocking him, Harper, down.

Urged on by these thoughts and fears, Grip-sack Sid showed no mercy to his mount, pressing him to top speed no matter what the nature of the ground over which that trail led. And as he mentally noted the passage of time as he drew near the spot where the Black Chameleon had surprised him and Morris, his hopes rose higher.

"There's time enough, and if I give that girl even a hint of coming trouble, my cake's all dough!" he reasoned, turning his horse out of the direct path to the fort, aiming for the river near where he had crossed it by swimming while seeking to regain that packet of notes.

Catching a glimpse of the moonlit water, Grip-sack Sid dismounted, hastily tying his horse to a stout bush, then passing on to the edge of the river, turning on his back as he reached his middle, holding both pistols above the water as he rapidly swam across.

Of course such a brief immersion could not injure the metallic cartridges with which the weapons were loaded, but with such a rough customer to tackle, Harper was taking no chances. He might drop the weapons from his belt, or the water might clog their mechanism, just when he needed a prompt response from them the most.

Less than a couple of minutes carried him down the river in sight of the little cabin for which he had been aiming. But, with a thrill of mingled doubt and fear, he found it completely dark.

True, he remembered that *two* marauders had been spoken of, and if the first was really Michael Jameson, the second might also be Norah; but he had reasoned differently. If they were the outlaws he now firmly believed, he expected Norah would be at home, with the double purpose of receiving the Chameleons, and to deceive any spy who might come that way in quest of information.

"For they surely were not entirely fooled by my call, yesterday!" he frowningly muttered, at the same time stealing silently up to the end of the cabin. "They must have smoked my purpose, though neither turned a hair when I sprung my little trap!"

That was what had troubled him not a little ever since, and what had helped turn his stronger suspicions in the direction of the Singed Cat pards; the innocent surprise, even pleasure, with which Norah and Michael Jameson had received his account of how he had hidden the money in the hollow tree, that night.

With an ugly shiver as these thoughts flashed through his mind, and almost wishing that he had chased the rascal who had knocked him down so neatly, instead of coming off on this wild-goose-chase, Grip-sack Sid silently examined the cabin as far as he could do so without running the risk of awaking possible sleepers within.

Gently trying the door, he found it fast. That proved nothing for or against the Jamesons, for such would surely be the case whether they were abroad on nefarious business, or soundly sleeping, the rest of the innocent.

There were only two windows: one through which Grip-sack Sid had caught his first glimpse of pretty Norah, the other in the opposite side, or end, rather, looking into Norah's chamber. Each was composed of a single sash of six panes of eight by ten inches each. And, what was much more to the purpose, both windows were securely fastened on the inside, and Grip-sack Sid did not dare lose time or run the risk in trying to ascertain just how those fastenings were applied.

If his suspicions were well founded, and they the ones who so daringly attempted to rob the house of Conrad Hastings, one or both of them must soon put in an appearance, if they returned at all.

"They may be inside, sleeping like innocent lambs!" he rather doggedly mused as he fell back to a point of cover from whence he could readily note all that went on about the cabin, while himself unseen. "I may have made an infernal jack-donkey of myself in flying over this way. But—I'm betting big dollars to little coppers that neither is fact! Somebody take me up!"

He gave a half-chuckle, half-snort of disgust as he could not help recalling the boy who whistled loudly to keep his courage up while passing near the graveyard in the dark.

"Mighty nigh my own mournful condition! But I'll never admit as much—even to my own lonesome self!"

Full half an hour—ten times that long, if he had judged simply by his own impatience—Grip-sack Sid lay in hiding, watching, listening, almost praying for the coming of his game. Then—

Instantly he was all on fire as he caught the sound of a splash in the water at the ford, just as though an incautious foot had slid from one of the damp stepping-stones!

Then—only a few seconds later—he caught sight of a dark figure hastily nearing the cabin, coming from the direction of the ford.

"Lieutenant Lizard—for big money!" he mentally cried, glowing all over with savage joy as he made this important discovery.

But he never lifted hand nor drew weapon, waiting for the right moment. He saw the figure reach the door, open it and enter. Then, with a keen glance toward the river to make sure Captain Chameleon was not following closely, Grip-sack Sid crept up to the window through which he had played spy before, reaching it just as the gleam of a match leaped out into the darkness. And when the candle was lighted, its faint glow fell over the figure of Lieutenant Lizard, sure enough!

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW HARPER SWEEPED THE DECK.

THE only noticeable difference lay in the fact that the military overcoat had been discarded, probably because its security as a further disguise could not outweigh its incumbrance where light marching order was all-important.

Now that the puzzling enigma seemed on the point of solution, Grip-sack Sid felt all his characteristic coolness return, and standing far enough back from the window to avoid being himself discovered by a glance in that direction, he watched and waited for further developments.

Lieutenant Lizard, as the candle sputtered and grew dim for a bit, cast a glance backward toward the front of the cabin. It was as though he caught the distant sounds of a friendly coming, for he sprang to the door, holding it ajar for a single breath, bending an ear to the crack.

Breathlessly Grip-sack Sid watched his every movement. And he inhaled a long breath of grim satisfaction as he saw him draw back, closing the door, but without slipping the strong oaken bar into place.

He never doubted what that action meant. Some one was coming, sooner or later, who was entitled to admission without stopping to rap or wait for some one to open the barrier.

With a pretty accurate idea as to who that personage would prove to be, Grip-sack Sid resumed his former position, watching Lieutenant Lizard as a hungry cat watches a mouse which frolics just beyond its certain leap.

Then—with an indistinct sound, Lieutenant Lizard plucked off the combined mask and hood

which covered both face and head! And with a swift leaping of exultation through his heart and brain, Grip-sack Sid recognized the now pale but still beautiful face of Norah Jameson!

Norah caught up the candle and turned toward the second room, in which her bed formed the most prominent feature, either by accident or intentionally swinging the door nearly shut behind her.

Grip-sack Sid hesitated only an instant, though, thanks to the peculiar arrangement of the cabin, built fairly against the face of the hill, he was forced to pass around in front of the building in order to reach the opposite end. This he risked, though knowing that Captain Chameleon might put in an appearance just at the most awkward moment.

There was less cover close to this window, and the moonlight added to the risk he was running, but Grip-sack Sid felt himself richly rewarded by his first glance through that window.

Norah had cast back the old-fashioned founce, or valance, which reached to the floor, and guarding the flame of the candle with one hand, used the other to open a hidden trap-door, which fell downward, like the trap of a scaffold. Then, with a deft agility which spoke of ample practice, she turned and slipped feet foremost into the opening, taking the candle with her.

Grip-sack Sid was too intensely interested in this performance to think of probable discovery in turn, and he with difficulty choked back a glad cry, as, thanks to the rays cast out by the candle, he saw that here, as with the front door to the cabin, Norah left the way open for the one whom she expected to speedily follow her.

"Which step first?" the Grip-sack Sharp asked himself, when that dim glow faded out, leaving all inside the room dark and invisible. "Michael is the big muck-a-muck, of course, but—a bird in the hand makes a hungry man heap sight better meal! So—you're my dainty, darling, dimpled dumpling, Norah, avick!"

With that decision quickly made, Grip-sack Sid acted instantly, not knowing how long it would be before Norah might return, in her own plump identity, and naturally he would prefer catching her as at least half-way Lieutenant Lizard.

"Then I could cuss the man half, while I soothed the feminine half, don't ye see?" chuckled the highly-elated detective, sweeping the moonlighted space toward the ford as he passed around to the front of the cabin.

He saw nothing to indicate the speedy approach of Captain Chameleon, and with a mental hope that the "high-muck-a-muck" would delay his arrival just long enough for him to put pretty Norah in bonds, Grip-sack Sid softly opened the door and stepped inside the cabin.

Closing the door, he leaned against it long enough to remove his foot-gear, then, in noiseless socks, he crossed over to the other chamber, finding no difficulty in guiding himself, thanks to the light coming through the little window.

He touched his pistols, to make sure they were ready to his hand, though he expected nothing more formidable than a woman to deal with, at the end of that mysterious passage. He slipped under the bed, and then descended what felt like rude steps cut in the ground.

As he reached the level of a narrow passage, Grip-sack Sid caught sight of a dim line of light, apparently coming from the further side of a partly-closed door, and tiptoeing that way, he stole a cautious look into a fairly spacious earth-chamber, the walls of which still bore traces of pick and drill.

So much he saw at the first glance. He did not stop for another.

Norah Jameson was at that precise instant stooping over, pulling over her head the close-fitting body-garment worn as Lieutenant Lizard; and woman though she was, Grip-sack Sid was not ashamed to accept the important advantage thus offered him.

A cat-like leap, a brief struggle, through which came one smothered scream; a few busy seconds; then Grip-sack Sid drew back, breathing a trifle more quickly than ordinary, but glowing all over with that wild, fierce, strange triumph which a man-hunter invariably experiences when he has made an important capture after a long and hard chase.

Norah lay bound and helpless, her face flushed almost purple, her dark eyes on fire, her muscles strained to their utmost tension as she strove to release herself.

"You devil! bloodhound! liar! All that is—"

"To be continued in our next!" chuckled Grip-sack Sid, whose nimble fingers were swiftly preparing a gag. "Sorry to be so awfully rude, Miss Norah Jameson, alias Lieutenant Lizard, but—bite on that!"

Before she could divine his purpose, Grip-sack Sid slipped the gag between her teeth, holding it in place despite her fierce efforts to eject it, until he drew the knots tight behind her head.

"I'll have to commit suicide as the only means of gaining absolution from my own conscience, Norah," he said, in tones of mock despair, as he drew back a pace to contemplate his work. "I always gagged a pretty woman with kisses, up to this time. But—rest easy, darlint! I'm

going up-stairs to welcome daddy Michael when he returns from taking that moonlight stroll for his health. Wonderful thing, that moonlight bath! Sure cure for the rheumatism!"

It was hardly the part of a man to thus jeer at a woman, but Grip-sack Sid had suffered far worse treatment at those same fair hands, and knowing how much trouble and misery Norah had helped give rise to, he permitted his worse traits to gain the ascendancy for the time.

Knowing that Norah could neither break away from her bonds, nor utter a sound loud enough to alarm her confederate, Harper gave the cave-chamber a hasty but fairly thorough inspection, assuring himself that there was no other method of entering or leaving it save by the passage which he had so fortunately seen Lieutenant Lizard open up, then blew out the candle, taking it with him, and retraced his steps to the cabin above.

A keen look through each window, then through a narrow opening at the front door, assured him that his expected prey was not yet in sight; but feeling confident that, unless Ran Tucker should have overtaken and brought the Black Chameleon down by a lucky shot, Michael Jameson would put in an appearance in due course of time, Harper settled down to await that coming, with what patience he could summon.

"What's waiting?" he asked himself, with a smothered laugh of triumph. "I'd wait a century for such an ending! What are the instructions given by OUR HOUSE? Never to let a customer slip through our fingers until he has given an order, big or little, costly or profitable, the latter for choice, but—sell your man at all hazard! And if I ain't going to sell Daddy Michael, then I want to know the reason why?"

Perhaps he would not have felt so confident of success, had he known—what was a fact, to be discovered later—that there was one other avenue of escape from that underground chamber!

Grip-sack Sid, blissfully unconscious of this fact, busied his fingers in tearing into strips suitable for binding a prisoner, a stout blanket which he had taken from the low pallet evidently devoted to the use of Michael Jameson. He made rapid work of this, though in the dark, crouching close to the door, ready for instant work before any one coming in by that entrance could strike a light or otherwise suspect his presence.

But rapidly as he worked, he was hardly through when his keen ears caught the sound of a hasty step, and preparing for hot work, Grip-sack Sid waited breathlessly.

The door opened, and a dark figure stepped over the threshold, to fall like a log before that crushing stroke!

"That's one for your nob, captain!" cried Harper, leaping upon the fallen outlaw, eager to make his victory sure.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A BRACE OF TOUGH CUSTOMERS.

WITH so much at stake, Grip-sack Sid preferred the risk of killing his man outright rather than let him have a chance to escape through being dealt with too gently.

And the first touch of his trained hands told him that Captain Chameleon was beyond fighting for his liberty just then, though that peculiar quivering of the flesh just as certainly declared that life had not entirely fled as yet, whatever might be the ultimate result of that sturdy stroke.

Satisfied on this point, and remembering that the Crimson Chameleon was not always without tough backers, Harper rolled the body over so he could shut the door, which he instantly barred.

This done, his next move was to disarm his prey, and then bind both hands firmly behind his back, all of which took but a single moment of time. Willing hands make quick work, and if they are trained through years of practice so much the better.

Having done this much, Grip-sack Sid took time to listen for dangerous sounds from outside, then stole from window to window, using his keen eyes as well, without making any unwelcome discovery.

"I'd ought to rear back and howl for the whole gang to come on, I suppose," he chuckled, returning to his latest captive. "But enough is as good as a feast, and any man who'd ask for a bigger haul than I've got right here, only lacks a ring in his snout and a bristly backbone to be a h-o-g, hog! Whoof-oof-oof!"

Feeling pretty certain that only these two had participated in that night expedition, but knowing that no one could force an entrance into the cabin without making noise sufficient to reach his ears, Grip-sack Sid grasped the insensible outlaw under the arms, dragging him into the other room, thrusting him feet foremost through the dark trap, letting him slip bump-bumping down the earthen steps.

"A man that's born to be hung'll never break his neck tumbling down cellar!" he laughed, returning for the candle, then entering the black cave.

He struck a match and lit the candle, stepping over the body of the man, whom he looked at just long enough to see that it was indeed the

Black Chameleon, and entering the earth-chamber where he had left Norah Jameson to her bitter reflections.

She was still there, though her altered position told how strenuously she had striven to burst her bonds and, by using the hidden exit from the den, turn the tables on the man whom she had called a human bloodhound.

"Brought you company, Norah, darlint!" chuckled Grip-sack Sid, putting the candle down on a dirt shelf, then turning back to drag his second captive into the cave. "So mighty bashful that he prefers to keep his face concealed, you may observe, but—*presto change!*"

He jerked off the stiffened mask and hood, but started back with a sharp ejaculation of surprise and wonder. For that was not the face of Michael Jameson.

It was the face of a man who could not have numbered more than five-and-thirty years, at the outside. A face smooth shaven, strongly marked, yet surpassingly handsome. The face of a criminal for whom more than one heavy reward had been offered—the very man for whom Grip-sack Sid was searching, when a possible clew led him to Solid City!

For many minutes the detective could only stand and gaze, now laughing, now turning grave as he bent a little lower, like one who can hardly trust the evidence offered by his own senses. And while he thus assured himself that there was no mistake, he also recognized those features as belonging to the man whom he had broken bread with as Michael Jameson, greatly altered by the loss of that gray wig and full beard, but undeniably the same person!

Not a word did he utter, after that first involuntary exclamation of surprise, until Captain Chameleon opened his eyes, with a gasping shudder. Then—

"At last, Harold Tremaine! Run to earth at last!"

A choking cry of mingled rage, pain, doubt and despair broke from the outlaw's lips, but before he could rally from the shock sufficiently to struggle, Grip-sack Sid had him bound, feet as well as hands, and propped up in such a position that he sat face to face with Norah, his ally and fellow captive.

This done, Grip-sack Sid spent many minutes in searching the den, bringing to light the famous crimson suit, with various other disguises; and among other points of interest discovering a hidden passage leading from the cave to the outer air. He gave a contented sigh at this last discovery, for now one perplexing point was made clear; the manner in which the "Black Chameleon" and Lieutenant Lizard had left the cabin in time to reach their ambush before Harper and Morris reached the spot where they were "held up."

Closing the door, but sitting near it, so that he could hear any suspicious sounds which might indicate other arrivals at the cabin, Grip-sack Sid put away all thoughts born of that truly astounding discovery for the time being, at once plunging into the business which led up to this important capture.

"First, Captain Chameleon, let me tell you bluntly that if you dare raise that melodious voice of yours a single octave higher than the key-note my voice sets, I'll drill a hole through that comely head in front of you! That's sworn to. I don't make a practice of killing women, but I'm in this game to win, and you are the main stake. *Sabe?*"

Those dark eyes flashed back sullen defiance, but Captain Chameleon only closed his lips the more tightly. And Grip-sack Sid saw that he would have his hands full, if he hoped to extract any reliable information from that desperado.

Nothing daunted, he hastily sketched what had taken place at the house of Conrad Hastings since the packet of bank-notes reached there in safety, concealing nothing of importance; after which he put his first direct question:

"What have you done with Hastings? Where have you hidden him?"

Those dark eyes drooped, but never a sound came from those lips.

"Does that mean that you will not confess, Captain Chameleon?" purred the detective, smiling instead of frowning. "Do you know, Harold, dear boy, that I rather like the notion of coaxing you a bit? Though I'm not exactly an Indian brave, just at the present time I really think I could give any big Injun odds and a discount at coaxing—with you as a subject!"

Still grim, sullen silence. More surely than ever did Grip-sack Sid realize that he had tackled a particularly tough customer!

"All right, my boy!" lightly nodded the detective, rising to his feet and taking up the candle. "I'd just as lieve spend a week or two in such eloquent company as not. And as it makes me tired to keep trotting up and down stairs, reckon I'll make one trip answer for a score."

Without aught further to throw light on his intentions, Grip-sack Sid left the den, closing the door after him. He left the light on the top step, just below the open trap, then stole out for another searching look through each window in turn.

He saw nor heard aught to alarm him for the safety of his captives, then took blankets from

the bed, with which he snugly curtained the windows, shutting out all light, and at the same time guarding against any possible betrayal of himself when he brought up the candle.

This he did now, using it to enable him to make a collection of cooked food, which, with a pail of water, he carried down to the den where he held his prisoners in durance.

"Nothing like stocking up the garrison before the siege fairly begins, you see, pardners," he placidly remarked, as well as he could for a mouthful of cold meat and bread. "It don't require so mighty much for one set of grinders, though I'm a hearty eater when I haven't anything on hand that's of deeper interest. For instance—talking over what you expect to make out of kidnapping Conrad Hastings!"

"I'll make revenge, if nothing else!" surlily growled Jameson.

"Good enough for a starter," with an approving nod. "Maybe if you keep up that gait, you'll hit the trail of truth, after a bit. As a gentle lift from a friend—where is Conrad Hastings stowed away?"

"Find him—if you can, curse you!"

"Of course I shall. I never yet missed a point which I'd once set my whole mind on gaining. Witness my capture of you two, as road-agents, and you, Harold Tremaine, as thief, forger and assassin!"

There was no answer, save a glare of deadly hatred. And from that moment on, Captain Chameleon seemed to have sealed up his lips.

"It doesn't really matter, you know—to me," placidly uttered the detective, eating like a man who heartily enjoys his food. "I can waste a month, for that matter, knowing that I'll reap my reward in the end. And though Hastings may not turn up in time to complete the deal for the Singed Cat Mine, Morris will attend to that. I've given him pointers enough to make Mohr and Pickett glad to get off so easy, if only to save hanging in a yellow suit similar in cut to that which you are now wearing, Harold. But—

"You, as a strong man, can doubtless stand considerable starving, but how about the dainty Norah? If I can't shake your nerve by pinching you, I'll turn my delicate attentions toward your—is it wife?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SINGED CAT PARDS HOLD OUT.

"WE have waited long enough. Now we must act!"

Ida Fenwick was the speaker, and her big blue eyes shone as though backed by electric lights. Her face was very pale, plainly telling of long hours of painful suspense, of sleepless nights and restless days.

She was standing in the doorway leading from the hall to the little room which Conrad Hastings called his office, his snuggery.

Within that room were gathered Harlow Crampton, Evan Morris and his mother, Billy Trigger and two other citizens who had been selected after a long and careful consideration, to help defend the \$20,000 over which such a stubborn fight had been made of late.

Three of those who should have been there at that hour, were missing: Conrad Hastings, Randolph Tucker and Sidney Harper. No clew to where the first named had been taken could be found, though keen and persistent search had been made by his friends.

Ran Tucker had neither been seen nor heard from by any of those now beneath that roof, since the minute of his leaping through the window to take the trail of the Black Chameleon; nor had Grip-sack Sid given sign or token since that same momentous night.

And now the time appointed for the final payment on the Singed Cat Mine had come around; the day, and almost the first of the two hours between which the \$20,000 must be offered—

"By the hand of Conrad Hastings!" muttered Evan Morris, dejectedly, only a few moments before Ida Fenwick came down from her chamber, gloved and in riding habit, ready for the saddle.

"An' writ' by his hand, too—wuss luck!" almost howled Uncle Harlow. "Whatever made him be so mighty dug-gun peticklar, Billy-be—"

Billy's doings were never fully described, for just then Ida Fenwick flung open the door and her voice rung out almost sharply:

"What can we do, more than we have done, Cousin Ida?"

"Save the property for which poor father has paid so dearly! It is now nearly one o'clock. It will take us the best part of an hour to get to the mine. Come! let's up and be doing!"

"Ef you ax it, honey, gal," nodded Uncle Harlow, rising from his seat with poorly counterfeited cheerfulness. "It can't do no mighty sight o' harm, I don't reckon."

"Nor any good!" moodily muttered Morris, on whom the last two days had wrought a serious change, both bodily and mentally. "They'll point out the clause in the contract, and stick to the very letter!"

"Then—if fair means fail us, meet the knaves with their own weapons!" flashed the maiden, her spirit showing stronger than that of any

other present, now that the test had come upon them. "Offer them the money with one hand, and let the other fingers clasp a pistol! Give them their choice between money or lead!"

"Whooray fer the gal!" enthusiastically burst forth Uncle Harlow, flinging his hat under foot, then catching Ida in his arms and kissing her loudly on her lips. "Billy-be-dug-gun ef she ain't wuth a dozen bull rijiments o' sech pesky stoughton-bottles as we be—countin' out Mrs. Morris, be course!"

Billy Trigger joined in that wild yell, and looked as though he might like to more fully carry out the example set him by Uncle Harlow. And without further argument on either side, that point was carried.

Little time was lost in preparing the horses for the road, for in a measure this move had been anticipated, when it seemed likely that all else would fail them.

Up to the last minute they had striven to keep up courage, to hope that either or both of the missing young men would return with good news, perhaps even bringing the rescued mine-owner with them.

That hope was gone, now, and as no further message had come to them from Captain Chameleon, yellow or black or red, and all their searching had failed to hit upon a single clew to the mysterious vanishment of the three men, only this extremely forlorn hope was left them.

Forlorn enough, yet it seemed as though no one fully realized how utterly hopeless it was until fairly in the saddle and riding along toward the Singed Cat Mine, with that precious packet in possession of the—seemingly—weakest one of the company, Ida Fenwick.

By this time it was pretty generally believed that Conrad Hastings owed his abduction to the Singed Cat parads, though there was not a particle of positive proof to bring against them. And having covered their tracks so cunningly, having risked so much to gain their evil ends, would the partners in crime weaken now?

Even Ida Fenwick lost something of her hopes as they came in sight of the little cabin standing near the mouth of the mine, and saw the grim figures of Adolph Mohr and Paul Pickett before the shack, both smoking, each one bearing a Winchester rifle in addition to the customary belt of arms about their waists.

To the contrary, Uncle Harlow brightened up at the sight, and in guarded but more cheerful tones, he shrewdly muttered to his mates.

"They're skeered, or they wouldn't putt on sech a mighty bluffy front to skeer us! Cool an' stiddy! we'll git thar with both feet!"

There was no time for more words, but what need? A volume could hardly have said more.

A quick glance from Ida's blue eyes sent Crampton a length ahead, to open the parley, and the old gentleman greeted the Singed Cat parads with as much cordiality as though they were the best of friends.

"How d'y, gents! Fine day fer business, eh? An' anybody kin see with hafe an eye that you're ready an' waitin' fer jest that, eh?"

"When the right man comes—of course," smiled Pickett, showing the white teeth beneath his black mustache.

"Meanin' Hastings?" innocently asked Uncle Harlow, crossing a leg over the neck of his horse as they came to a halt.

"He's the one we have to deal with, but there's no particular hurry. It's only a little past two o'clock, unless the sun lies."

"We have brought you the twenty thousand dollars to complete the purchase of this mining property, sir," sharply interjected Ida Fenwick, unable to wait longer upon the deliberate old gentleman. "Will you accept it?"

"Certainly, ma'am," with a low bow, removing his pipe and holding it behind his back.

"When the proper person presents it."

"Oh, come, Pickett!" frowned Crampton, but before he could say more, the junior member of the firm cut him short.

"Business is business, and so Conrad Hastings told us when he drew up the papers. He plainly feared that we would try to get the better of him, through some little trick. He did all he could to bind us fast, while leaving a loop-hole through which he might crawl in case the mine petered out before the day came 'round for the last payment. Now we simply stand up for our rights, as plainly stated by Hastings himself."

"We offer you your full price; will you accept it?"

"When Conrad Hastings presents it; not unless, Miss Fenwick. Nor even then, if the clock has ticked off even one little second past the hour of four!"

"You villain!"

"Hard words break no bones, Miss Fenwick," with a light laugh.

"You know that my father cannot come—because you have stolen him away—may even have murdered him!"

"Hard words, my lady," sneered Pickett, his dark eyes flashing vividly, as he brought his Winchester with its butt resting on his hip. "It is easy to accuse; but where are your proofs?"

Uncle Harlow interposed to keep the peace, which Evan Morris seemed only too much inclined to break, since the example was set him

by the maiden whom he had learned to love so passionately.

Crampton argued as earnestly as though his own interests were at stake, but neither of the Singed Cat pards would give an inch. They pointed to the final clause in the contract, a copy of which had been kept by each principal. They stood ready to yield up the property when the price was offered them in accordance with that contract, but not until.

The mine was now worth fully ten times what they had agreed to take for it in the first place. They had been robbed of the first payment made. They would get but a pittance when the bargain was completed, while the lucky purchaser would have a fortune, ready made.

Even Harlow Crampton began to grow hot as the minutes swiftly fled, and the final hour was more than half-spent without any amicable agreement being arrived at. But Paul Pickett grew cooler in the same ratio, while Adolph Mohr said never a word, grimly smoking, grimly watching, his repeating rifle gripped ready for use in case of need.

Crampton threatened the partners with lynch law in case they remained stubborn, but Pickett merely laughed his threats to scorn. They had done no wrong. They had simply lived up to the contract which Conrad Hastings had drawn out with his own hand. Who could harm them for that?

Again the money was proffered. Again it was refused. And then, her blue eyes fairly flashing fire, Ida Fenwick was on the point of bidding her friends capture the partners at any cost, when keen-eyed Billy Trigger gave a yell of delight, pointing as he cried aloud:

"Looky yender! Holy smoke! *Thar he comes, now!*"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"MONEY OR HEMP—CHOOSE!"

PICKETT and Mohr shrunk back to the cabin wall, gripping their rifles in grim desperation at that sharp cry, for they, with all of the others, believed that only the appearance of Conrad Hastings could draw forth such words.

Following the direction of that pointing finger, all caught sight of a horse, bearing two figures, and a man walking at its head, a hand on the bridle. But then a cry of relief burst from the lips of the men at bay, for neither of these three figures could be recognized as that of the missing mine-owner!

"Ketched 'em! Ketched 'em all two both on 'em!" fairly howled Billy Trigger, running toward the new-comers, in whom were now recognized Grip-sack Sid, Captain Chameleon and Lieutenant Lizard!

Harper, realizing the situation at a glance, bluffed Billy Trigger off without answering any of the flood of questions which he poured forth, hastening his steps until close to the opposing parties.

"Where's Mr. Hastings?" he asked, glancing around.

"Haven't you—oh!" gasped Ida, drooping in her saddle as her last frail hope perished.

"Where's Ran Tucker?" asked Harper, turning to Crampton.

"Haven't see'd hide nor hair o' him sence that dirty night—wuss luck our side!" spluttered Uncle Harlow. "An' them cussed bull-heads won't take the money! They say—"

"We stand simply on our rights," sharply interjected Paul Pickett, with a defiant glance into the strong, stern face of the new-comer. "If *Hastings* offers the cash, before four o'clock, we'll accept it and sign. But no one else has even the shadow of a right to make that offer!"

Harper pulled out his watch and glanced at its face.

"It lacks seven minutes of being four o'clock. I make that offer, Messrs. Mohr & Pickett."

"And we decline to even consider it," was the cold retort.

Grip-sack Sid turned toward his friends, as by instinct singling out the guardian of the money.

He held out a hand toward Ida, and without a word she gave the package of bank-notes.

Turning again, the Grip-sack Sharp stepped close to the partners, holding out the package as he quietly spoke again:

"Money or hemp—choose!"

"Neither the one nor the other. Stand back, sir! We're on our own ground. We are prepared to defend our rights. Dare to infringe upon them, and your blood be upon your own head!"

"Accept the money, sign the papers, turn over the mine and other property to the representatives of Conrad Hastings, or I'll put you in irons and hold you for trial as the Yellow Chameleon!"

"Dare to try that, and we'll make it cost you such a sum in damages that you'll need to sell your pelt to even begin making up the sum!"

"Where vhas dose broofs, meinherr?" grunted Adolph Mohr. "Dalking vhas easy, und when it gomes py making dhose vordts blain as brint, dot makes you blendy droubles, I dink me so—nein?"

"Time is up!" cried Paul Pickett with savage triumph, as he stole a look at the face of his watch. "Now skin out o' this, all of you! You

are trespassing on our property, and no living man can say—"

"You're a liar, by the watch!" cried a clear, mocking voice, and Ran Tucker sprang around the corner of the cabin, closely followed by Conrad Hastings, pale and haggard, yet full of life and energy.

Hastings caught the packet of money from Harper's hands, thrusting it toward the amazed Pickett, pointing his free hand toward the corner of the cabin where, her face showing marks of tears, stood Pauline Mohr!

"I offer you your choice," Pickett, and you, Adolph Mohr," Hastings said, sharply. "Take this twenty thousand dollars and sign that paper. Refuse, and I'll hang you higher than Haman!"

"And I'll play Lord High Executioner!" laughed Ran Tucker, dancing back far enough to catch Pauline by an arm, bringing her forward despite her reluctance. "Jig's up, Yellow Chameleon! Polly has confessed everything, thanks to my good luck in catching her red-handed, so to speak! Take your choice—and mighty lucky you are to have such a liberal offer made you, too!"

"It's a lie! I deny—"

"No use, Paul," huskily interposed Pauline. "That cunning devil tracked me to the old man, when I went to carry him the food you sent. He listened until he heard enough—"

"To fit a snug noose about *your* neck, Paul, my lad!" laughed the dashing sport. "If not one knotted by law, itself, still a noose that will and can jerk you into eternity just as suddenly!"

Then the villain's courage broke down, though he strove to hide his fears. He asked for a few words in private with Pauline, and recognizing the end, Hastings freely granted it.

Long before Grip-sack Sid could finish explaining how he had succeeded in capturing the two notorious outlaws, each of whom wore their road suits, with their curious hoods and masks combined secured at their belts, the Singed Cat pards realized that their desperate game was lost beyond all hope.

Adolph Mohr was grim and silent as ever, but Pickett did the talking for them both. He refused to admit having played the Yellow Chameleon when Evan Morris was wounded, or that he was the one who captured Conrad Hastings. But, though the time set for the final payment had passed before the money was offered them by the right person, rather than have further trouble—for Pauline's sake—they would waive their rights, and accept the \$20,000.

"I'd be just that amount in pocket, if I had the say-so," frowned the Grip-sack Sid, after Hastings agreed to those terms. "And if I hadn't about all any one pair of hands can well hold fast to, I'd run you two rascals in—and put you where the dogs couldn't bite you, too!"

But Hastings was glad to have the matter settled, even at the heavy price he paid, and when the papers were signed, together with another, declaring that the Singed Cat pards concluded the bargain of their own free will, pledging themselves to leave that section and never more attempt any further trouble connected with the mine, the entire party witnessed their signature, and the defeated knaves were permitted to depart in peace.

Billy Trigger and the two men from Solid City were left at the mine to guard the property until relief could be sent them, then the others, forming a cheerful, happy, even gay cavalcade, despite the presence of the two prisoners, took up their journey toward home.

Once there, with Captain Chameleon and Lieutenant Lizard locked in a chamber, explanations were in order.

Enough has already been said to shadow forth about all that is essential to this story.

Randolph Tucker found Conrad Hastings, through shadowing Pauline Mohr, who was sent with food to the dark, damp hole among the rocks where the Singed Cat pards meant to keep him a prisoner until after the important day had passed. Pauline was disguised in masculine garments, and felt no fear of recognition by the captive, in that dark den.

Tucker captured her, and then, by alternate threats and coaxing, won a full confession from her lips, though so much time was thus consumed that they came very near being too late in their arrival at the Singed Cat Mine.

Grip-sack Sid explained his part, telling how vainly he tried to force a full confession from the lips of Captain Chameleon. He had, up to the actual appearance of Conrad Hastings, believed that he had been abducted by these outlaws, though his earlier suspicions had turned toward Pickett and Mohr.

Finding that nothing short of actual torture would win a confession, he finally resolved to carry them to the Singed Cat, rightly reasoning that his friends would be there, instead of at home.

He spoke of the past crimes of Harold Tremaine, on whose trail he had been when he first came in contact with Captain Chameleon. He said that punishment was certain, if the criminal could be safely taken back to the scene of his evil deeds. And, reminding Hastings that a trial here would bring Ida into court to bear

witness, while the chances were great that a lynching would break up the trial, he asked them to waive their claims, and permit him to take his prisoners, undisguised, unsuspected for what they had been in that region, back to meet their punishment.

And Ida cast the deciding vote. After all, one was a woman. *She* ought not to fall a prey to lynch-law!

So it was finally decided, and, to make a short story, Grip-sack Sid took his prisoners back to the scene of their evil deeds, and after a fair trial Harold Tremaine was found guilty, suffering the full penalty of the law. His wife was convicted of lesser crimes, and sent to prison for a term long enough to bring full repentance with it.

The Singed Cat Mine was fairly developed, then sold for a fortune. Evan Morris wooed and won Ida Fenwick, and all was well with them.

Randolph Tucker never again turned chameleon, even in jest, for Jonah Rice resigned his position and left for more congenial parts.

That departure was celebrated in Solid City by—among other less important festivities—the marriage of Randolph Tucker with the "Certain young lady" who assisted him in manufacturing that famous blue suit. And—during the dance with which that wedding wound up, the gay bridegroom delighted all present, including himself, by wearing the blue garments.

Only for the curious but most fortunate chance which led to the appearance in public of both a red and a yellow chameleon, at the precise hour when, miles distant from their scene of operations, he had worn the blue, even audacious Ran Tucker would hardly have dared confess himself the "Blue Chameleon." As it was, it made him more of a hero than ever, since he had only assumed that character for the purpose of "taking Jonah down," and on the second occasion for the purpose of saving his fellow-citizens from lynching an innocent man.

Billy Trigger took another "night off" on that occasion, and besides kissing the blushing bride, got most gloriously drunk over the vanishment of his ancient enemy, "Granny Rice!"

Grip-sack Sid?

Still in harness, and louder than ever in his praises of first, "OUR HOUSE," and second, "Dewey's Magic Salve!"

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